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MIRAGE

BY

E. TEMPLE THURSTON

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TO

THE LITTLE BRASS MAN

"Talk of freedom! This a slave's world is, and we must wake

To slavery as generations pass;

But some there are who cut the fetters from their feet and make

A little God—of brass."

London, xi. vi., 08.

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MIRAGE

CHAPTER I

THE BOARDING-HOUSE—BLOOMSBURY.

HEMMING in the grey, dreary plot of ground called Torrington Square, there is not one only, there are many boarding-houses. In winter, they look out on to a tangle of black, leafless tree stems in which no bird ever shelters, on to a patch of grass in the square's centre which is mottled and worn and ugly, on to the grimy, sooty palings which surround this cherished garden of the inhabitants—kept from the intrusion of outsiders as though it were the plantation of Eden instead of a mocking ghost of green fields, a haunting skeleton of forests. And in summer, by the grace of God, the prospect is perhaps a little better than this.

But here it is, in the heart of these abodes, that there may be found some of the saddest people in the world. A boarding-house is not a home; it is not a lodging. In a home there is sense of possession. There is sense of possession in those lodgings, the bedroom and sitting-room, that one takes over a tobacconist's or a greengrocer's in a busy street. But in a boarding-house there is none. These abodes are the poor-houses, the alms-houses of the gentle, the refined, the well-to-do pauper—the man who can lay claim to nothing but his own soul and that self-respect which becomes the dearest possession that he has.

Here is to be found the foreigner, coming to London to learn the language on a pittance that admits of bare living alone. It is a bare living that he gets.

Here is the old Army captain, dragging out existence through its "sandy deltas" on the flimsy substance of his pension, his wife dead, his daughters married, his sons ne'er-do-weels in odd corners of the globe. Here also is the old maid who cannot shake herself free of the fever of London life in which she moved so brilliantly—so she will tell you—when she was a girl; here the young lady with yellow hair who is learning singing—perhaps at the Academy; the young man studying medicine, doing the hospitals; the old lady who likes to be in London when Parliament is sitting and the Court is in town, who vanishes when the Season is over and disappears no one knows where. Here you will find the young clerk, the old man of mysterious identity, the lady of forty-three with a trembling income, who moves from one of these abodes to another in the hope that a day may come when she will meet the man who loves her. Here is the artist, the musician, the writer, the journalist, all the incompetent people of the earth—all paupers, every single one of them, all struggling to keep whole upon their backs that delicate garment of self-respect which in this life wears so easily, looks shoddy so soon, and realises so little when the stress of circumstance forces you to pledge its value.

They dine at eight o'clock. They dress for dinner—the men if they can, the women always. It is a simple matter to put on a black skirt and turn down the neck of a blouse when you are rewarded with the soothing knowledge that it is more or less exactly what the best people do.

In the drawing-room afterwards, while the men sit over their cigarettes and their gritty coffee, the young lady with the yellow hair sings popular songs and thinks aloud of the days when she will be in musical comedy. When the others come upstairs there is bridge to be played, gossip to be talked, and it all combines to flatter them with that consciousness of self-respect, to drug them with that sedative of thought

that they are living the lives of English ladies and English gentlemen in that not too-unfashionable neighbourhood of Torrington Square.

Here, in this particular square, at a number not to be mentioned in consideration for those who might by chance pick up this book, see therein their little weaknesses, their little follies, and feel incensed that they had been thus unwittingly betrayed, there lived an old gentleman. Old? He was scarcely fifty-eight. But Time and Circumstance do not deal in the same lavish spirit of generosity with all of us. They had dealt unkindly with him. His hair was quite white; his moustache, his eyebrows, the little tuft of his imperial, these too were very nearly white as well.

All through the winter, at four o'clock on every afternoon, the door of this house in Torrington Square would open, then the short, upright, little figure, wrapped in its black overcoat, the white woollen muffler tied tightly round his neck, the silk hat fixed in its exact position on his head, would emerge and descend the steps on to the pavement. For a moment he would stand quite still, his head lifted to the sky, whether there were sky to be seen or not—and you do not often see the sky during the winter in Torrington Square. When he had then apparently decided upon the state of the weather, he would march off in the direction of the Tottenham Court Road, and his malacca cane with its faded blue silk tassel would tap its ferrule on the pavement with each step that he took.

This daily walk was referred to by inmates of the boarding-house as his—constitutional. One elderly lady there was who alluded to it on every possible occasion when they sat down to dinner in the evening. She would remark that it had been very fine, or that it had been too wet for his—constitutional. There is an aristocratic sound about the word, bearing somewhat the same relation to nobility as is to be found in gout and all such maladies of the rich. Invariably he answered her in the same courteous way:

"Madam, I take my walk in any weather."

This was quite true. During the two years that he lived in Torrington Square he only missed it once, when an impenetrable fog had dropped its cloak of darkness into the streets, muffling, blinding everything. Then progress had been impossible. He had seated himself at the dining-room window, nodding his head, looking sometimes at his watch, sometimes saying under his breath, "What a country—what a country!"

Of all the various types herein described as to be found in a London boarding-house, this old gentleman is he of mysterious identity. That his name was M. du Guesclin—a Frenchman of course, a Parisian no doubt; that he was of good blood—the *du* before the name, the almost old-world courtesy of his manner, the aristocratic way in which he bore himself all testifying to the fact—were the only details likely of accuracy upon which his fellow-boarders could base their numberless assumptions as to his history. A history assuredly he had. No man so reticent of his own affairs, so gentle in conversation, so charmingly polite, could possibly be reduced to the necessity of living in a London boarding-house without a past history of some interest. It is still more unlikely that he should live amongst such a class of people and not gratuitously be given one.

They said that he was a spy in the payment of the French Government; they said that political intrigue had been the cause of his banishment from France. Some said that Du Guesclin was not his real name because he never received any letters at the boarding-house, and that therefore he might be anything from a member of the house of Orleans to a needy clerk dismissed from the services of the Republique. It is a noticeable fact that in all these tales, drawn at a venture, they ascribed some definite relation between him and his country. None of them were greatly to his credit; but that is easily accounted for When the

curiosity of human nature sets to the weaving of gossip it seldom grants an enviable reputation. It presumes —and rightly in most cases—that the man who will say nothing about himself has nothing good to say. Yet in every whisper that circulated round the echoing walls of the house in Torrington Square, there was the tacit admission that M. du Guesclin had a history which not one of them could suppose to be wholly insignificant.

It is not to be expected that they only sat still, vaguely speculating upon these matters. Active steps had been taken to elicit further facts about him which might throw a light upon the shroud of mystery in which he was enveloped. But they had led to nothing. Octave Bordenelle, a young French boy, come from a trading house in Lyons to learn English for the business requirements of his firm, had entered into a conspiracy and undertaken the following of the old gentleman when he took his constitutional at four o'clock in the afternoon. The result had been disappointing, for beyond proving his valour in the eyes of a young lady who considered such things valiant, he had accomplished nothing.

"I follow him"—this was his story. "He go with his old stick—what you say—knocking along."

"Tapping—yes, tapping—"

"I thank you—tapping along. When he get to the Tottenham Court Road he turn to the left. I follow—I follow on—on—*de l'autre cotê*—"

"On the other side," said the young lady.

"Ah, yes—the other side—you are *so* kind." He thanked her with devotional eyes, until she bid him proceed with his story.

"*Bien*," he continued, "he go down the road with his head—stiff—his hat"—he made a dumb show with his hands descriptive of that exact angle of M. du Guesclin's high silk hat—"*comme ca*—and he do not see me; he do not see anyone—he just walk, walk, walk"—he held his head rigid—"*comme ca.* Then

he came to a *café*—restaurant. He go in. I pass outside; I see him sitting at a table—I see a waiter come up to him and bow to him. He order something"—he spread out his hands—"*C'est tout.* It was all I could do. If I go inside—he see me."

"Well, I could have done that much myself," said the girl. Undoubtedly she could.

Beyond this essay there was little that could actively be done to clear the mystery. He never went out in the evenings. In a corner of the drawing-room he sat, after dinner, with a French book on his lap, his kind grey eyes sometimes patiently lifting in a gentle expression of forbearance when the incessant noise of conversation lifted above a certain note and jarred upon his ears. True, they peeped into his room when he was out, but beyond a plain wooden-backed hair-brush, a razor in its case, a strop at the end of the bed and a bottle of ammoniated quinine on the dressing-table, there was nothing to be seen.

In conversation his English was perfect, yet he seldom talked with anyone. If one of the ladies left a room in which he was sitting, the young men would stare at him as he rose hurriedly to open the door for her exit. He alone, amongst all the gentlemen there, stood to his feet when a remark was addressed to him; he alone waited until a lady had become seated before he seated himself. The men called it side—the women liked it, but admitted that it often made them feel uncomfortable.

Whenever anyone tried to draw him into conversation about himself he would say:

"My dear sir"—or "My dear madam, I am not interesting—I am merely old."

If they endeavoured to make him speak about France, he would reply:

"France—there is no France—there are only a few French people."

So the visitors to that boarding-house in Torrington Square came and went, the length of their visits vary-

ing according to their means or to their purpose, and M. du Guesclin, seated at his little table by himself in the dining-room, was always pointed out to them as the old gentleman with a mystery.

The youth, Octave Bordenelle, staying longer than most of them, found himself in the position of making the mystery the greater.

It happened that M. du Guesclin caught a cold and was confined to his bed. On the second day of his attack, the Swiss waiter, Adolphe, uncouth and dishevelled in appearance in the clothes of his short-lived predecessor, announced that a gentleman wished to see M. du Guesclin. This was only the second visit that the old gentleman had been paid. One of the mysteries it had been, that apparently he knew no one in London. Now this was dispelled. He had a friend. If he had a friend more might be learnt of him.

"What's his name?" asked the proprietress.

Adolphe insipidly shook his head.

"Go and ask," he was told.

"M. Courtot," he said when he came back.

M. Courtot was shown upstairs to his bedroom, and whether it was Fate, or whether it was intention, Octave Bordenelle came out of the drawing-room at that moment. His mouth opened as he gazed after the visitor. When M. Courtot turned the stairs out of sight he slapped his hand excitedly on his leg.

"Mrs. 'Arrison!" he exclaimed to the proprietress, "Mrs. 'Arrison, it is him! It is the waiter! *J'en suis sure! Absolument!* It is the waiter what come to him—what came to him—in the *café*. I recognise him—why not?"

This was a sad and a heavy blow. His friend, a waiter, in the Tottenham Court Road! M. du Guesclin no longer had political relations with his country. He was the proprietor of a restaurant—a *brasserie*—in Paris, had lost all his money and had come over to England. This M. Courtot was one of his waiters.

Could anything be more simple? But what a downfall from a political exile or a government spy? It was so obvious—it was so patent. It explained all his charm of manner. It explained why he would not seat himself at dinner before the ladies had sat down. What a disappointment! What a *debacle!*

CHAPTER II.

THE RESTAURANT—TOTTENHAM COURT ROAD.

SO much for the deception of appearances! The face of M. Courtot as he mounted the stairs was expressionless. They could learn nothing from him. But what need was there for them to learn now? They knew everything. M. du Guesclin was the proprietor of a *café*—the "*du*" was no doubt an accessory; the courteous manner, the aristocratic bearing, all these things were explained away.

But had they seen the face of M. Courtot as the door of the bedroom closed behind him, had they beheld his hurried yet deferential steps to the bedside, had they heard his emotional exclamation: "M. le Vicomte! *Mon Dieu! Vous êtes malade!*" their eyes would have started with wonder—they would have gasped in amazement.

M. le Vicomte! A French nobleman! Staying in a Bloomsbury boarding-house! The matter cries for explanation, and yet is simple enough when one comes to think of it.

Pride and penury will drive a man to a strange pass. With all the pride of the French nobility, and all the poverty that is to be found in the wake of unfortunate speculation, M. le Vicomte du Guesclin had left his beloved Paris and, for two years, dropping his title, had hidden himself in this miserable boarding-house in Torrington Square. To such a man as this, poverty

is a disgrace. To such a man as this, disgrace is only to be borne in silence, the lips tight-closed, the eyes uncomplaining. Too proud to face the generosity of his friends, too proud to place the name he bore in an unbefitting state, he chose rather to leave his country behind him and bury his existence in a London boarding-house—a graveyard where lie buried all hopes, all ambitions.

So he had exiled himself from every connection of the past—every connection but one. His servant, Courtot, followed him. Unable to retain him any longer in his service, M. le Vicomte had dismissed him in Paris. But when he came to London, Courtot followed. Taking a position as waiter in a restaurant in the Tottenham Court Road, he one day made his appearance at the house in Torrington Square. The first of the two visits which M. le Vicomte had received.

Sensitive to the slightest suggestion of pity, the Vicomte frowned when he came into the ill-furnished drawing-room, with its miscellaneous assortment of wicker chairs, and saw Courtot standing deferentially before him.

"I crave pardon, M. le Vicomte—" Courtot began.

"Here, Courtot," the Vicomte had interrupted, "I am M. du Guesclin. It is more convenient—it is more appropriate. How is it that you are in England?"

"I came, monsieur—I could not stay in Paris."

"But I gave you good letters of recommendation."

"Yes, monsieur—I have them all—but—"

"But what?"

Courtot prayed inwardly for tact.

"I have served you, monsieur, for seventeen years—"

"And now I need no service, Courtot."

"No, monsieur—I understand—but one gives one's service, and if one gives it willingly the heart goes with it. Service is in the blood, monsieur—it is in mine. I have given you seventeen years, and that is a lifetime. You must understand, monsieur, that when a

gentleman gets used to the attendance of his servant, he will not readily exchange it for that of another. That is so of the master, M. le Vicomte—but it is also the same of the man."

The Vicomte had looked steadily at a cheap oil painting that hung on the wall, and his eyes blinked three times in slow succession.

"Courtot," he had replied, "I have told you that here I need no servant; my wants—such as they are—are all attended to by the people in this house. You force me to repeat what it has hurt me to say already—I do not require your services any longer. I am sorry that you should have thought it wise to come over to this gloomy city. You will find lighter hearts than mine in Paris, I assure you."

"I have not come to offer my services, monsieur."

"Then why are you here? What is it you offer?"

Courtot stood stiffly erect. The pride of the master reflects itself in the man. He felt that he was about to humble himself in the Vicomte's eyes, and it went sorely against the grain.

"I am a waiter, monsieur—in a restaurant in the Tottenham Court Road. I had hoped that some day, if you were passing, you might step in and I might serve you with your meal."

The Vicomte had turned away and, for a moment, gazed out of the window into the dreary square, where some children, with piercing voices, were chasing each other in boisterous pursuit. To his eyes the outlook was almost squalid—squalid beside the great-heartedness of this man—a man of the people—who had thrown aside all outward dignity in obedience to that self-sacrifice which is the most dignified of all. Then he took a little snuff-box from his waistcoat pocket, opened the lid, dipped in first finger and thumb and, turning back again, concealed his emotion in a show of action—the hand shaking beneath the nostril, the jerky inhalation, the fluttering handkerchief brushing away the powder from his moustache.

"Courtot," he said quietly, "we will talk about this matter. I doubt if you have done wisely. I go every afternoon for a walk at four o'clock. To-morrow afternoon, if I happen to be near the Tottenham Court Road, I will come in and take some coffee."

If he happened to be near the Tottenham Court Road! There was nothing so certain in his mind at that moment than that he would be. Here was a friend! It had come to this, that his servant was now his greatest friend in the world. To himself, willingly, he admitted it. But to admit it to Courtot? That was impossible. For many minutes the next afternoon, he had wandered in the vicinity of the restaurant, debating whether it were wise, whether it were not showing too plainly his eagerness for companionship, if he fulfilled his promise upon the striking of the clock.

The evening before, his spirits lifted by the thought that even in his poverty he was not absolutely alone, he had written a little poem. To write verse after the fashion of his beloved Joachim du Bellay, this was the one pastime in which the Vicomte indulged. He did it so badly—but it pleased him so well, and since he had come to London, having no one to whom he could read these little creations of imagination, his note-book, in which they had been inscribed, had scarcely been opened. But now that was no longer the case. The note-book, with its latest addition, lay burning in the bottom of his pocket as he walked up and down the street in his uncertainty of mind.

The uncertainty was not of long duration. Once he passed the restaurant with head erect and eyes steadily fixed before him. The next time he entered.

Courtot had come forward. His round, placid, solemn face betrayed no expression of what was passing in his mind. He had seen the Vicomte as he went by the first time; had misconstrued that set attitude of the head. Now, he was only a waiter. Was it to be wondered at that his master should hesitate before entering to claim acquaintance As he came down

the room between the tables, he was conscious to a sense of the incongruity of his appearance. Four o'clock in the afternoon, and he was waiting on his master in a low-cut waistcoat! Ah! It hurt to the quick. How could it enter his conception that there lay a little poem burning a hole in the bottom of M. le Vicomte's pocket, or that in the bottom of his heart lay burning the need for companionship?

He could only think, as he walked down between the tables: "What contempt he must have for me! How he must hate to show that he knows me!" Yet his round, good-natured face was placid and unconcerned. He bowed as he stood beside the table.

"What would monsieur like?" he had asked.

To show enthusiasm there, to betray his pleasure, that would have been out of place. He spoke as though the Vicomte were a casual customer—come out of the moment—whom he might never see again.

The old gentleman looked up in hesitating embarrassment.

"Coffee, Courtot—coffee. Can you get me some coffee?"

"Certainly, monsieur."

They both felt very awkward. Neither of them quite dared to meet the other's eye.

When the coffee was brought, and the Vicomte had filled his cup, Courtot bent forward nearer the table.

"You are comfortable, I hope, monsieur, in the house in Torrington Square?"

"Oh, yes, quite, Courtot—quite."

"They give you good meals, monsieur?"

"Meals—oh, yes—I am a slight eater—you may remember that."

"I remember everything, monsieur."

The Vicomte looked up. If the matter were not to be obvious, this was his opportunity.

"You remember my verses, do you, Courtot?" he asked, with a hand feeling to his pocket.

"Oh, yes, M. le Vicomte—*pardon*, monsieur—I have not forgotten them:—

"'Tu viens a moi et dans tes yeux,'"

he quoted,

"'Je vois les ciels d'Avril—'"

"Good—good." The Vicomte brightened; his eyes lit up with pleasure. "I had forgotten that one myself. Good; do you remember how it went on?"

Courtot raised his eyes to the ceiling, thought, then dropped them to the floor and thought again.

"'*Si tu connais*—'" he began falteringly.

"*Ah, non! 'Mais je connais—mais je connais-connais'—oh, mon Dieu!* I have forgotten it myself. But see, Courtot"—out of the deep pocket of the old black coat he drew his little note-book—"I have written one more, after the style of Joachim du Bellay. Ah, Joachim du Bellay! There was a man who could sing!—sing like a thrush on a hawthorn hedge. Listen, I have written this—"

He spread out the note-book and read:—

"There will be another bud
On our red rose tree,
When the spring comes round again;
There will be another bud
For your eyes to see.

There will be another leaf
In this wilderness,
When the summer comes again;
There will be another leaf
For your lips to press.

There will be another grave
Where leaves and buds shall sleep,
When the winter comes again;
There will be another grave
Where your heart may weep."

He looked up when he had finished. Courtot's lips were tight pressed. He was gazing out of the open doorway into the street, where the 'buses were lumbering by, splashing the mud in sprays from their wheels.

"You like it, Courtot?" he asked.

"*Elle est charmante, monsieur—mais si vrai—si vrai—et maintenant—c'est toujours l'hiver.*"

The Vicomte shrugged his shoulders.

"It is *bourgeois* to be despondent," he told himself; but he offered no denial to the statement, and went on with his coffee.

When he had paid his bill, he left a sixpence on the table.

For one moment Courtot thought to refuse it. He picked up the money and his fingers rubbed reluctantly against the minted edge.

"My coat, Courtot," said the Vicomte.

Courtot hastened forward, took down the old black coat from its peg and, as the Vicomte turned his back, he slipped the sixpence into one of the pockets.

"He will find it one day," he thought.

CHAPTER III.

THE EIGHTEEN SIXPENCES.

YOU may picture the sense of solitude which M. le Vicomte had carried back with him to his boarding-house in Torrington Square. Whenever he remembered it, he held his head high; but more than once he found his eyes lowering to the pavement. Still, it was *bourgeois* to be despondent. In another twenty-four hours he would be taking coffee again in the dingy restaurant. Courtot had liked his little verses. Was there really anything to grumble at after

all? Up went the head and the malacca cane tapped more resonantly than ever upon the pavement.

When the door was opened for him, he tried to close his eyes to the distressing sight of Adolphe's greasy shirt-front and the black bone stud loose in the well-worn stud-hole. It was not a very noble sentiment to be jarred in life by such details as these. Courtot had liked his little verses:—

"When the winter comes again
There will be another grave
Where your heart may weep."

"*Et maintenant—c'est toujours l'hiver.*"

He cast his eyes on Adolphe's unhealthy face, on Adolphe's dirty hands. He looked down the narrow, linoleumed hall, past the crooked hat-stand to the narrow, linoleumed stairs, up which Julia, the maid, in her pink print dress, was toiling with the enamelled cans of hot water for those who desired to wash for dinner. Then he repeated Courtot's little phrase again to himself:

"*Et maintenant—c'est toujours l'hiver.*"

He shook his head. It was quite a despondent view of life. Courtot was of the people. He was a fine fellow no doubt. There were excellent traits in his character. He had made no scene of enthusiasm in the restaurant. That was thoughtful of him—that was considerate. Yes, there were excellent traits in his character; but he was of the people. And to prove it all to himself, as he mounted the stairs to his bedroom, he repeated the other lines of his little poem:—

"There will be another bud
On our red rose tree
When the spring comes round again."

And he smiled—quite cheerfully, quite genuinely he smiled.

That evening at dinner, he had been readily drawn into conversation. When Miss Amelia Cubbitt had fulfilled everyone's expectations of her and said, "It's been quite a fine day for your constitutional, Mussu Guesclin," he had surprised her by a lengthy reply, involving a still further tax upon her powers of making conversation.

"It's so wonderful to me," she admitted, "to watch the way the evenin's are drawin' out. Haven't you noticed it? Last evenin' was quite dark at four o'clock."

"Are you always waiting for the spring, then?" he asked.

"Yes, I suppose I am." The sound of the word "spring" in that gloomy boarding-house dining-room cheered her. She smiled at the thought. It seemed nice to think that she was waiting for the spring. She felt the younger for it. Then she turned her smile to him and passed the salt across the table before she had helped herself.

"After you, madam," he said, and returned it.

When the joint had been served Mrs. Guthrie leant across from her little table where she was sitting *vis-a-vis* with her husband—her husband who had come to spend his holidays in London by learning motoring.

"Can you tell me why the veal is always so tough here, Monsieur de Guesclin?" she whispered. She made patent endeavours to masticate it as she smiled into the Vicomte's eyes at the implied humour of her question.

"Is it tough?" he asked.

"My goodness, you try it!"

She stopped in her meal to surreptitiously watch him put the first piece into his mouth. As soon as his teeth had closed on it she leant across the space between the tables once more.

"Well?" she whispered.

He looked up surprised, unaware that she had been observing him.

" Aren't I right? "

" I believe it makes it still more tough to think about it," he said quietly.

She admitted the philosophy of that, but saw nothing of the reproach. Why should she? The Vicomte never meant her to—besides, and these things are a matter of taste as well as of breeding.

All through the dinner they had discussed the food, until, omitting the last course, he had excused himself and left the table.

" Not taking any cheese, Mussu Guesclin? " asked Miss Amelia Cubbitt, in astonishment.

" No, thank you," he replied graciously, as though she personally had offered it to him. " Not to-night."

" Fancy not taking cheese," she said; " I should go away from dinner absolutely empty here if I didn't take cheese."

" They don't have to cook that, you see," Mrs. Guthrie remarked with a smile. " Miss Girmanoff—the Russian lady—tells me she comes here to get thin." She chuckled. " Not surprised, are you? She says she's lost ten pounds in weight since she's been here."

Conceive such an atmosphere as this for a vicomte of the nobility of France! Imagine it for anyone with the senses refined! Picture a Byron in the midst of them all, who could not bring his eyes to watch food pass between the lips of the most beautiful woman on earth!

Yet in such surroundings, never complaining, writing his little poems week by week and reading them for the appreciative ear of his faithful Courtot in the dingy little restaurant in the Tottenham Court Road, the Vicomte lived for the whole space of two years.

If ever friendship could be said to be complete, it was that which existed between Courtot and M. le Vicomte du Guesclin. Yet the old man never lost the dignity of the master and Courtot never encroached upon the familiarity of the friend.

Always it was: "What will monsieur take?"

Always it was: "Coffee, I think, Courtot—coffee."

And not till well five minutes had gone, till Courtot by some little allusion—some apparently unpreconceived remark—had removed all obvious eagerness from the situation, did the Vicomte dive his long, thin fingers into the deep pocket of the old coat and bring forth the notebook with the new poem it contained.

For some weeks matters had continued in just this way. He took his coffee. He talked to Courtot. He read his poem—if a new poem were there to be read—and, as he departed, he left a sixpence lying concealed away beneath his saucer.

It required no little delicacy of management to always secure the piece of money without his knowledge. To slip it into the coat pocket when once he had got it in his fingers was simple enough. But sometimes the opportunity did not occur. Then it was kept over until the next time, held in readiness in the hand and replaced when the coat was taken off.

One does these things without fear of consequence. In his imagination, Courtot conceived the Vicomte finding a stray sixpence in his pocket and feeling the richer—as if by a pound—in its possession. It never entered his sense of the probability of things that the Vicomte might never feel in the pockets of his overcoat from one week's end to the other; that one by one the sixpences might multiply until with their weight and their jingling, their accumulated existence attracted his attention.

Least of all did he anticipate that their discovery would be made in his presence.

Three weeks had gone by since the Vicomte had paid his first visit to the restaurant, and eighteen sixpences, their ringing muffled in the fluff that had collected round them, lay reposing in the capacious lining of his old black coat.

As Courtot held the collar and the Vicomte dragged his arms from the sleeves they dropped the garment between them.

Then there was a jingling! The Vicomte looked round at Courtot, Courtot looked mysteriously at the Vicomte; but the blood began its creeping into his cheeks.

"Now that is most strange," said the old man. He found just such an interest in the mysterious sound as a child might show in a conjurer's trick.

"I have heard that noise before," he persisted. "Just pick up the coat, Courtot, and see—just pick it up and see. It sounds like money; but I never carry money in a pocket, loose—like that. Pick it up and see."

With infinite reluctance Courtot held up the coat.

"Perhaps it was one of the buttons striking the floor, monsieur."

"No—no—let me feel in the pockets. Spread it out over the table!" He became peremptory.

Courtot drew a breath and laid it down. Then he looked up at the ceiling. If there were consolation to be found there he did not discover it. But one always looks there. It is the direction of heaven.

"Nothing in that," said the Vicomte, as he went through one pocket after another. "Nothing in that. Ah!" He had found the little mass of coins in the corner of the lining. Then he began to extract them one by one through the frayed hole in the bottom of the pocket. Each one he laid on the table. With every coin Courtot winced. With every coin the Vicomte whispered, "Sixpence." And with every coin the inflection of his voice changed.

Surprise became doubt—doubt, astonishment—astonishment, bewilderment; then he realised and stood erect.

"Courtot!"

"Yes, monsieur."

"This is the money I have given you!"

Courtot clasped his hands, looked this way and then that. He could not meet the old man's eyes.

"This is the money that I have given you!" repeated the Vicomte.

"I did not want it, monsieur."

"You did not want it?"

"No, monsieur."

"Is that a sufficient reason for you to think that I should want it?"

Here was a most tactless thing to have done. Courtot wished himself at the bottom of the sea. He had not seen it in that light. What right had he to make a gift to his master? It was an insult! He had not seen it in that light. He wrung his hands, but there was no way out of the dilemma.

"Monsieur, I crave your pardon. It was thoughtless of me. I did not want the sixpences."

"And you thought I did."

"No, monsieur. *Je vous assure. Milles pardons*, monsieur! I thought it would be a pity that the money should be thrown away upon me when I am well paid already. I just put it back in your pocket. I crave your pardon, monsieur."

The Vicomte picked up the money piece by piece. Eighteen sixpences! Nine shillings! Nine shillings would purchase—Oh! what did it matter! He placed them in Courtot's hand.

"What are your wages here, Courtot?"

"They are very good, monsieur."

"Ah, yes, but what are they?"

"Ah, monsieur, it is quite sufficient."

"Exactly—you do not wish to tell me?"

"I will tell you willingly, M. le Vicomte. I have said it is good pay—it is good for what I have to do."

"And what is it?"

"Ten shillings a week, monsieur."

Ten shillings! His weekly bill at the boarding-house was thirty shillings—reduced at that in consideration of the period during which he stayed. For the

moment he let his imagination run to what comforts might be obtained for ten shillings.

"I have a mind, Courtot," he said quietly, "to send you back to Paris."

"Oh, no, monsieur, I am happier here. Sometimes a customer gives me money, monsieur. It is not always only ten shillings a week."

"And do you put other people's money back into their pockets?"

"Ah, no, monsieur."

"Then why mine?"

The shrugging shoulders of a Frenchman are full of the prettiest of phrases. The neatest excuse in the world can lie in just that one way in which he spreads out the expressive fingers accompanying the gesture. We have not learnt the art of silence in this country. Our hands are dumb, not silent members of the body. They can grip a spade; they can grip an axe. But in the grasp of them, a thought is mutilated.

"What would you like, monsieur?" asked Courtot, quietly, as the Vicomte seated himself.

The old gentleman looked up and his lips twitched to smile.

"Coffee, I think, Courtot. Just a cup of coffee."

CHAPTER IV.

THE POST-OFFICE—BLOOMSBURY.

THERE is a small printer's and stationer's shop in the neighbourhood of Torrington Square, which combines the advantages of its trade with that of a post-office. An old woman, with grey corkscrew curls and features which, in expression, are early Vic-

torian, manages the entire business of the shop, while her two sons superintend the labour of the printing, which is conducted in a little out-building attached to the house.

Behind the counter, where stamps are sold and all the duties of postal arrangements fulfilled, there are three girl clerks.

These have all been through the Civil Service mill. They are the modern product—independent, self-satisfied, self-confident; cheeky sometimes to customers who do not accord them their full measure of respectful attention. But the old lady with the corkscrew curls and the early Victorian expression has them all under her thumb as though they were daughters of her own. No little flirtations are carried on over the counter when she is in the shop. They move in dread of the stern glance of her censuring eye, and not one of them dares to be seen exceeding the limits of her duty.

To this little shop every morning after breakfast came the Vicomte for his letters.

"Here's the old Viscount," they whispered each day when he made his appearance. Why, with a Civil Service education, they should give him his title in English cannot be satisfactorily explained, unless it be that when you learn French for the requirements of your trade, you use it sparingly and only for the exigencies of that trade itself.

He would walk down the shop, past the counter where the stationery was sold, acknowledging with a courteous bow the bob of the old lady with the corkscrew curls, and in reply to her respectful "Good morning, sir," he would always say, "Good-morning, good-morning," twice, the second time in exactly the same tone of voice as the first.

At the post-office counter he stopped and, as if it were the first time he had ever done it in his life, he would inquire:

"Are there any letters for me?"

And Maud, or Alice, or Evelyn, whichever of the three girl clerks it happened to be who had managed to be the one to attend to him, would produce the envelopes from their little pigeon-hole, pushing them towards him under the wire-netting which separated them from the customers on the other side of the counter

They hated to tell him the days on which there was nothing. It was not because he looked disappointed. In the back of their minds they all received that impression which he gave to everyone who met him—that he was far too proud to admit of such an emotion as disappointment.

"Seems as if all he lived for was his letters," Evelyn had said one day as he walked, head erect, but empty-handed, out of the shop.

"Well, next time there's nothing you'd better write him one yourself," said Maud.

"What's the good of that? It's coming through the post he likes them."

"Well, post it. It'll only cost you a penny."

"Yes; then he gets it the next day when he's got plenty of letters."

"Yes, he gets it if you give it to him," Alice broke in.

"Keep it then do you mean?"

"'Course, keep it till there's none."

Here the intrepid young lady paused. The way was being made so easy that she lost courage. They taunted her. They laughed.

"I'll do it," she said. "What do you bet I don't?"

"Bet you sixpence," said Alice.

"Right—taken!" They shook hands on it in the orthodox way. These young women, in matters masculine, are nothing if not orthodox.

Then the letter was composed, approved of by a council of three, and posted in the pillar-box outside. For three days it retained its place in the little pigeon-hole, other epistles being given precedence. On the

morning of the fourth day it had leant against the side of the pigeon-hole in all the daring significance of loneliness.

"Bet you don't give it to him even now," said Alice. "If old Mother Tyndal gets to hear about it there'll be a row, you know."

Thought of her sixpence spurred her to intimidate. One is not really anxious to lose sixpence out of fifteen shillings a week.

"Bet you I do. I'm calculating the chances that he may answer it, then I shall get his autograph. He'll never tell Mrs. Tyndal. Why should he? He's far too dear an old thing"

And she gave it, sure enough.

When Monsieur le Vicomte walked down the shop, standing at the counter of the post-office and inquiring "Are there any letters for me?" she handed it across to him as readily as you please. Maud and Alice held their mouths open, anticipating the moment when he would look at the writing and guess the secret. Besides making one a coward a guilty conscience plays the very deuce with one's common sense. How could he have guessed the secret? Moreover, he never even looked at his letters. They were just thrust into the pocket of his old black coat with such an air of unconcern as if the chances were in favour of their never being opened at all.

So he had done on this occasion, sublimely unconscious of the pretty little trick that was being played upon him.

The next morning there had been a letter for Evelyn at the post-office. Instinct prompting her, she tore open the envelope. The others pressed round.

"M. le Vicomte du Guesclin presents his compliments to Miss Evelyn Jones and thanks her for the thoughtfulness of her letter."

She laid it down with a vivid sense of disappointment.

"Wish my name wasn't Jones," she had said. "It

sounds so rotten next to his, don't it? And I haven't got his autograph."

That was the end of the little incident. The Vicomte himself had come as usual for his letters, just as gentle, just as courteous as before; but he never alluded to it across the counter.

Then one day, two years after his first calling at the post-office, there was a letter for him, containing news that altered the whole current of his affairs.

He always waited until he got back to the boarding-house before he opened his correspondence. It was contrary to all principles he possessed, to be seen gratifying curiosity in public. In his little bedroom, with its suite of deal furniture and its one wicker arm-chair, he took the letters out of his pocket and opened them.

Before this particular communication he sat for some minutes reading it again and again. At last he rose to his feet and began a hurried pacing of the room, saying all the time to himself, "I must not be excited, I must not be excited."

But his face was red; his hands clasped and unclasped as he walked backwards and forwards to the window, looking out over the huddled roof tops of Bloomsbury and the veil of smoke and smuts blurring the face of it all.

A cottage—in the country! A cottage in the country instead of this! The good God was *too* good. How could it actually be true? Yet there the fact of it stared at him placidly from the sheet of notepaper that he held tremblingly in his hands.

M. de Lempriere, friend of the family of Du Guesclin, had died, and in his will was the Vicomte's name. A man of many wanderings, possessing that quaint twist of the mind which loves to live from place to place, he had at one time purchased a cottage in Buckinghamshire. Opportunity had never come to him to furnish it. He had never passed a night beneath its roof. Just seeing it in mid-summer, with its porch of

climbing roses burdened with bloom all desecrated by the glaring ugliness of a house-agent's sign-board, he had stopped, opened the small wicket gate, walked up the path and peered in through the low latticed windows. Of course it was charming. Such a chance could not be lost. At the house-agent's, on his way through the village, he had remained and, except for the confirmation of references from one who was an utter stranger, the matter had been concluded then and there.

Now it had fallen into the possession of M. le Vicomte du Guesclin. True, it had to be furnished, but there lay in the Credit Lyonnais bank a sum of just one hundred pounds—all the capital that the Vicomte had in the world.

"Oh, my friend, oh, my good friend," he said again and again to himself. It lessened the prospect in no way in his mind that he had never seen the cottage and knew nothing of its charm. It was the country! He looked out of the window again on to the disordered mass of roofs and chimneys, where never a tree was to be seen. It was the country! All the rest he took for granted. The sense of possession would become his again. It would all be his own. And Courtot! Courtot should come with him. The old *régime* had come round again.

Was it really all to be believed?

These two years in this poor-house in Torrington Square had well-nigh ground their lesson into his existence. The heart, the spirit of him, that they could never have touched. But he realised then that in his habits, in the daily attitude of his mind, he had almost become a slave.

This sudden freedom, he looked at with eyes in wonder. That proved how much a slave he had been. Why should he wonder? Why be amazed? It was the most natural of all things that a Du Guesclin should be master—and in his own house.

He glanced at his watch. It was half-past twelve.

There were three hours and a half to run before it would be four o'clock. Why not go at once and have lunch in the little restaurant in the Tottenham Court Road? He marched downstairs, out into the street, and a quarter of an hour later Courtot saw the glass doors swing open to his entrance.

CHAPTER V.

THE LETTER

PERFECTLY self-possessed, but with pulses beating under the old black coat which Courtot slowly drew off, he announced his intention of having lunch.

"I thought I should like a change, Courtot. The hashed mutton in Tavistock Square is all that might be expected of it. It is its monotony that I do not like. Now what are you going to recommend?"

"The *filet mignon* is very good, monsieur, or would monsieur like to begin with soup? *Petite marmite, croute au pot, bisque de homard?* They are all very good."

"Yes, why not *petite marmite*? Somehow or other to-day, Courtot, I feel extravagant. Yes, why not *petite marmite, filet mignon?* and give me the wine list."

In wonder Courtot brought it. What had happened? Something had happened. Then he, too, felt his pulses beginning to beat in anticipation. It might be the latest poem, better than all the rest. But Courtot's pulses did not beat in anticipation of that. He could not tell exactly why they were beating at all. But there it was; and when he hurried off to order the *petite marmite*, he found himself questioning what could have occurred.

When he came back, the Vicomte had a letter be-

fore him which he put aside, folding it with quiet deliberation. On that letter all Courtot's thoughts centred.

"I will have a small bottle of '43," said the Vicomte. "If it really is the '74 vintage it ought to be very good. I hope it will not be corked?"

"I can guarantee that, monsieur."

"Very well, then, a half bottle."

"Thank you, monsieur."

Even in the way he said "thank you" there was a question implied, an appeal to be told everything. But the Vicomte quietly commenced the taking of his soup.

Courtot lingeringly picked up the wine list and departed.

He came back—no wasting of time—with the cob webbed bottle reposing sleepily in its basket.

"This almost makes one remember, monsieur," he said, as he carefully wiped the neck with his serviette.

"Remember what, Courtot?"

"The old times, monsieur."

The Vicomte laid down his spoon.

"The wine? Ah, yes. I had some few dozens of '74, hadn't I?"

"Eighteen, monsieur."

"Really? Your memory is too good, Courtot. I find it better to forget these little things. Look at the way you remembered my '*Tu viens a moi et dans tes yeux.*' It's a bad practice, Courtot. In this life look forward—it is generally too distressing to look back. The people of France dare not look back now. It is all in front for them, or not at all. You probably think me too old, Courtot—"

"I, monsieur? Too old?"

"Yes, you think my time of looking forward is gone?"

"If that were so, monsieur, why should I remind you of what is passed?"

"Because you fancy that that has been the best I

shall ever have. You are too despondent. It is *bourgeois* to be despondent. What did you say when I read you out my little poem—nearly two years ago—the first afternoon that I came in here? Do you remember, '*Et maintenant—c'est toujours l'hiver.*' That's not true, you know, that's not true. There's always in the air a breath of spring just coming, or a breath of summer hardly gone."

"'*C'est toujours l'hiver!*' Nonsense, my good Courtot, nonsense. This is the third of March and if only you open your lungs enough you'll find spring in the air to-day. I feel it—I feel it. Well, what next? *Filet mignon?* This wine is excellent."

Yes, something must have happened. Courtot was convinced of it. He bore off the empty soup plate as if it were a bowl of roses, his head in the air to catch their scent, when really, all that reached his nostrils was the savour of the *petite marmite* which M. le Vicomte had left.

When he returned with the *filet mignon* the same little mystery was performed all over again. That sententious-looking letter upon which all Courtot's instinct concentrated was once more carefully folded and put away by the Vicomte's side. The air of unconcern settled quietly again upon the old man's face, obscuring all the thoughts which Courtot divined were alive beneath the placidity of his expression.

It was like watching a veil of dust lie thickly down upon some transparent surface. The desire to blow it away—to ask—became almost an obsession to Courtot. What had happened? But training does not go for nothing. The perfect servant is he who gives perfect service by instinct. Courtot's face was as expressionless as his master's.

He would be told what had happened. In good time he would be told. Till then he steeled himself to content.

At last it came. When the little plate of *roquefort* was placed in front of him, the Vicomte looked up.

"Courtot," he said quietly, "I have received a letter to-day from M. Courvoisier, my notary in Paris."

He paused. It was undignified at such a moment to hurry.

"Yes, monsieur."

"I think, Courtot," he went on slowly, "I think I shall leave London. It is a beautiful city to those who love it; to me it is unspeakably grey—unutterably lonely. I feel sometimes in London like a man wedged in a crowd that is crushing the breath out of him, who might well be conceived saying, 'Now I must die, but if only I need not die so much alone.' What would you do, Courtot, if I went to live in the country?"

"Me, monsieur?"

"'I' is correct, Courtot."

"Pardon. I, monsieur?"

"Yes—what would you do?"

"If I could get something to do there, where you go, monsieur, I should come as well. If you would permit."

"Supposing there were nothing to do. Where I think of going, there are no restaurants. It is quite the country. Just a few cottages, just a few houses, that is all."

"It is not necessary always to be a waiter, monsieur. I have worked at the harvest in Brittany when I was a boy. In my father's farm, not many miles from Dinan, I have worked in the dairy. It is not necessary always to be a waiter, monsieur."

"Quite so, Courtot, but it is sometimes necessary to consider one's dignity. You have been my servant, Courtot, the best servant perhaps the Du Guesclins ever had. Have you no pride about that? Has it not hurt you in some little way to come here and give your obedience to *M. le proprietaire?* Will it not hurt you infinitely more—supposing it were ever possible for you to get work upon a farm in the country

—to give your obedience to the rough, uncouth commands of an English farmer?"

Courtot straightened his waistcoat and brought his heels together.

"The real pride of a servant, monsieur, is not his form of service, but the master whom he serves. The pride I have, Monsieur le Vicomte, is to be your servant. I lose none of that when I work upon a farm. If you will be so good, monsieur, I hope you will allow me to find work in the country where in my spare time I may be able to be of service to you."

All this must be nonsense! These things never happen. Yet I assure you just such a conversation did take place in a little restaurant in the Tottenham Court Road; and when it came to this point the old gentleman rose to his feet and held out his hand.

"Courtot," he said, "you are coming with me to the country. Not as a labourer—not giving only spare time to my service. I want a servant, someone to attend to my needs and to look after my rooms."

Courtot took the hand that was offered him and bent over it.

Could he believe what he heard? Were not some things too good to be true?

The Vicomte sat down again.

"You remember M. de Lampriere?" he said.

"Yes, monsieur."

"He is dead. He died some few weeks ago. In his will, the good fellow has remembered me. He purchased a cottage down in Buckinghamshire—one of those impetuous impulses of his—now he bequeaths it to me. And that is where I am going to live. I do not think I shall require more than one servant, Courtot. Can you cook?"

"I shall do my best, monsieur."

"And your wages? Well, to be honest, I must admit that I cannot afford to pay you as I used to. These facts are regrettable, but it is as well to be honest and admit them."

"There is no need to talk of the wages, M. le Vicomte."

"Pardon me, Courtot, I shall pay you forty pounds a year. If that will please you, I shall be pleased to have you come."

"I want no more than I am getting here, monsieur."

The Vicomte took no notice.

"This is the letter I received," he went on, "from M. Courvoisier. I will read it to you." He spread out the paper.

"'The will of your late friend, M. de Lampriere, was read out yesterday. In it, your name was mentioned. He leaves you the entire possession of the little cottage which he purchased some time back in the village of Sunningham in the county of Buckinghamshire. It is not furnished, for, if I remember rightly, M. de Lampriere just looked in at the windows but never even stood under its roof. Sunningham, you will probably remember, is the place where your cousin's daughter, Rozanne Somerset, has gone to live with her uncle, Mr. Wilfrid Somerset, so that if you take possession and occupy the cottage you will have friends quite near you.'"

When he had finished he looked up at Courtot and his eyes were focussed to a far mental vision.

"Rozanne Somerset," he said, half to himself. "She was a baby of three when I saw her last. Courtot—"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Do you remember Mme. Somerset, my cousin?"

"Yes, monsieur. I remember her setting the roses on your table the last time she came to see you."

The Vicomte folded up the letter and put it in his pocket.

"Ah," he said gently, "so you haven't forgotten that? Neither have I—neither have I."

CHAPTER VI.

ROZANNE.

HERE follows the departure of M. le Vicomte du Guesclin from the boarding-house in Torrington Square. Mrs. Harrison was shocked when she heard the news.

"I hope you've nothing to complain about the food," she said with acidity.

"Nothing, madam, I assure you. I have always found it the same."

He had a sense of the humorous, had M. le Vicomte du Guesclin, but he could wrap it up in such a way that the tissue of the compliment concealed the jest against oneself.

"I suppose you're going back to Paris?" she asked with natural inquisitiveness. Things had probably gone better; he was going to open another *brasserie*. He was at liberty to; but he was a foolish man. He would be coming back one of these days to live cheaply once more on the excellent fare which her establishment provided.

"Perhaps when you come over to London we shall see you again?" she added. That was her wish. A vague desire formed itself in her mind that his restaurant would be a failure, and, accompanying it, the scarcely conscious realisation that he would return to be a source of income to her for the rest of his days. This is the essence of charity—the utmost of it—in the mind of the proprietress of a boarding-house.

"I've no doubt we shall see you again one day," she concluded cheerfully with a chilling smile.

"All things are possible, Mrs. Harrison," he replied.

Adolphe, with his dirty shirt front and his unwashed face, had come to the door, brought the Vicomte's

trunks to the cab outside and been munificently rewarded. Julia had had her share as well. They were all sorry to see him go.

Miss Amelia Cubbitt, coming down to the drawing-room to shake his hand, had said that they would all miss him very much; yet seeing that, except for herself, they were a very fluctuating contingent—there one day and gone the next—the compliment was a doubtful one. But she meant it well.

"I suppose you go back to Paris?" she said, with the same taint of curiosity in her voice as had prompted Mrs. Harrison's question. "I'm sure Paris must be very lovely—in the spring—just at this time of the year. I've never been to Paris." She announced the fact very wistfully, very regretfully.

"I don't suppose you would like it so well as you think, Miss Cubbitt," said the Vicomte. "There is nothing to complain of in Paris. It is always itself. Here, in London, one can never be sure. One day is never the same as another. You can be so cross, so put out with London. You can't be cross with Paris. I think you would miss that. English people like to be cross—they are disappointed with life if it offers nothing to be cross about. No, I think you are happier in London. Think how happy you are when it is a wet day and the King is compelled to drive to Paddington in a closed carriage so that you cannot see him. Do you follow me? Good-bye."

She stared after him. What did he mean? What in the name of goodness did he mean? For a week she asked everyone in the boarding-house what he could have meant. They said he had not meant anything; that he had not known what he was talking about.

And so departed that kind, chivalrous old gentleman—gentleman by courtesy—the proprietor of a French *café*, a Parisian *brasserie*—from the boarding-house—whose number may not be mentioned—in Torrington Square.

One does not come to Sunningham by train. The nearest station is four miles away. A cab must be chartered at the livery and bait stables which belongs to the station hotel near by. Into this antiquated vehicle, the Vicomte stepped that afternoon, sniffing at the musty odour of damp upholstery with which it was cushioned, but complaining of nothing. Life was too good to complain.

Three days before, Courtot had been sent on to superintend the arrival of the furniture and get the house ready for his master. He had written that day to say that everything was prepared, and now the Vicomte, sitting behind the ambling trot of the old station horse, sometimes leaning back with a sigh of content against the dilapidated cushions, sometimes gazing out with the wonder of a child at the passing country, was coming to his own.

The cottage stood out to the road, with only a little strip of garden and a wooden paling protecting it from the passing of the traffic. As he drove up the road, past the muddled cluster of houses which comprised the village of Sunningham, the Vicomte could with difficulty control his eagerness. He had to lean forward. He had to peer through the window at the lights in the cottage that twinkled through the pale green leaves of three lilac trees which sheltered the house from the vulgar gaze of the public.

Everything was ready for him. It was all his own. He could see the firelight dancing on the white walls within. Then, as he stepped out of the cab, the cottage door opened and Courtot appeared. The Vicomte straightened himself. He gripped his malacca cane very firmly in his hand and walked sedately up the little path into the house. Courtot followed respectfully, watching the Vicomte with an expectant eye, as the old gentleman stood and looked about him.

"Well, monsieur—well, monsieur, do you like what I have done? Isn't this better than the boarding-house in Torrington Square?"

This was what he was longing to say. These were the words that danced in silence on his lips. But he stood there, beside the Vicomte, his face cast in the plaster of subdued expectancy, and the two of them played at dignity—the dignity of the master, the dignity of the man—like a couple of children in a nursery.

"Courtot," said the Vicomte at last.

"Yes, M. le Vicomte."

"I am going to propose an amendment."

"An amendment? I do not understand."

"I am going to suggest an alteration to a remark you once made to me in the restaurant in the Tottenham Court Road."

"Ah, yes—and what is it, M. le Vicomte?"

"*Maintenant, ca va être toujours le printemps.*"

"Ah, monsieur—yes—I was wrong. I am of the people. It is *bourgeois* to be despondent."

"You say that after me, Courtot."

"No, Monsieur le Vicomte."

"You have heard me say it."

"No."

"That is strange. What made you think of it?"

"You make me think of saying it, monsieur. You are never despondent. You are of the nobility—I am of the people. You are always cheerful, I am not. *Eh bien*"—up went the hands and the shoulders shrugged—"it is *bourgeois* to be despondent."

"So," said the Vicomte, with a smile, "one may come to the same truth from two opposite quarters of the compass. What is that?" He bent his head to listen.

"Someone knocks, monsieur."

The Vicomte stood away so that he could not be seen.

"Go and see, Courtot."

Courtot went to the door. He opened it.

"Has the Vicomte du Guesclin arrived yet?"

Courtot hesitated.

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"Well, will you kindly give him Mr. Somerset's compliments and say that if there is anything that he wants, will he send up to the Red House? You might say, too, that Miss Somerset hopes that he will find everything comfortable."

The Vicomte stepped forward.

"Is that my little cousin Rozanne?" he asked.

Courtot stood aside to let her pass, and when he saw her, the Vicomte's eyes widened, his fingers gripped the gold knob of his malacca cane.

"Are you Rozanne?" he whispered.

She nodded, pushed the brown hair from her forehead, laughed with her grey eyes.

"Yes," she said, "I'm Rozanne. We're cousins, aren't we?" Her hand stretched out.

The Vicomte bent his head to it. Then he looked up.

"Yes," he replied, "we're cousins. So were your mother and I."

CHAPTER VII.

THE SOLEMN COMPACT.

WHEN the Vicomte said that—"So were your mother and I," he talked into the past as one who answers an echo. It is quite possible for a man, well run in years, to begin life over again. But there is only one way he may do it. He repeats himself. Fifty-nine is not the age to discover new sensations. We go back, hopping, fluttering like a wounded bird to its nest. Safe there, it is in the reach of the imagination to fancy that we are just beginning to fly. Then the old sensations come back—a flock of memories with a rushing of wings that sounds so real it is hard to believe they are only phantoms.

With the sight of Rozanne, the Vicomte heard these rush of wings. Sensation repeated itself in his brain —the echo of all he had felt when first he saw her mother.

"You knew my mother well, didn't you?" she asked, and quickly added, "But then, how foolish of me—of course you were cousins."

"That hasn't made you and me well acquainted until now," he said with a smile.

"No—quite true. When did you know her first then?"

"We met first in '75."

He drew off his gloves, undid the buttons of his old black coat and took that off as well, hiding the frayed lining lest she should see it.

"'Seventy-five," he repeated, "before you were born or thought of."

"It must seem a terribly long time ago."

"Do you think so?" he asked. "When you have time behind you, you'll find it very short. It's only yesterday and to-morrow that seem a long way off. Yesterday because it's gone so utterly, gone so much more than last year, and to-morrow because you are waiting for it to come. It seems years to me now since I left London. I might have been here always."

"Where did you live in London?" she inquired.

"I—I lived by myself."

"Yes, but where?"

"In a house not far from Russell Square."

Her eyebrows lifted. That was just like her mother, he thought.

"Aren't the houses very large and very expensive there?" she said. "You'll find this cottage very tiny, I'm afraid."

He bowed and smiled.

"It's large enough for all I need."

"Well, do you like London? I don't. I can't think why you ever left Paris. I love Paris. I was there, you know, all the time until I was fourteen. Then,

when father died, I came over here to Uncle Wilfrid. I've never been back since."

"Do you want to go back?"

"What! Why over my bed I've got a little painting of the Champs Elysées in the middle of summer, with all the *bonnes* in their white caps and the children playing about, and I look at it every morning when I wake and try and make myself believe that it was really true that I used to play there."

"And did you?"

"Oh, yes, but for all you say it seems a terribly long time ago to me—so long that I can hardly believe it."

The Vicomte sat down in front of her and took her hand.

"Here we make a solemn compact," said he, with a smile.

"What's that?"

"We will go back to Paris together—one time in the middle of May—and we'll sit on the Champs Elysées under the trees and listen to all the children, and talk to the *bonnes* in their white caps. Do you speak French now at all?"

"Never," she pouted, just like her mother. "I've no one to talk to."

"Your uncle?"

"He won't talk French, and when he does it makes you feel twice as much in England."

"Then will you talk to me?"

"Oh, shouldn't I love it!"

"Will you promise to come and talk then every day —*tous les jours*."

"But it'll be worrying you if I come every day."

"Worrying me? My little cousin! There was once a whole month when I talked to your mother every day. Say something to me now in French—just let me hear—just let me hear—"

He closed his eyes to listen. And when she spoke her voice tingled through him. He thought it was all new; he believed he was young again. Does any

man ever admit to himself that half his life is an echo? Does any man consent to believe that when he loves the second time it is only the repetition of the first? The world goes on twisting and turning as it always twisted and turned; but men and women will never bring themselves to admit it. No more offensive proverb was ever written for a lover to read, yet none more true, than when the wise man, Solomon, pressed his style upon the wax or his pen upon the parchment and wrote, "There is nothing new under the sun."

"Whatever shall I say?" she asked.

He did not open his eyes. The unconscious realisation was there that circumstance seldom conspires to trick every sense at once. He would not open his eyes.

"Anything," he said gently, "say anything."

"*Eh, bien—Je dit que je suis très enchanté de vous voir.*"

This was the passing of the wand. The trick was done. M. le Vicomte du Guesclin was a young man again. The years had fallen from his shoulders as a caterpillar sheds its skin and, in all the pride and ardour of a new-found existence, he thought he had left his crumpled age behind. It was not for him to realise then that he had but passed from one period of years into another; that what he had left behind him was not age, but that last remnant of youth which the stress of circumstance had shrivelled in its hands.

With eyes alight he looked up into hers.

"I was going to say you throw me back," he began, "I was going to say you have lifted me up and dropped me into the past, but that would be wrong—that would be incorrect. I—I am where I was—it is the past you play with—not me. You are the past. You are the present too."

She smiled. She thought him the dearest old man she had ever met. There was an air of romance in every line of his figure, an atmosphere of chivalry in all the words he said, in the very way he said them. The days when they would be talking French together

stretched out before her, filled with promise. Life in Sinningham had not been all she wished of it. Her uncle was a man eccentric in habits, morose in manner. His hobby of entomology absorbed every moment of his day. He talked of nothing else. Paris! He loathed it. The world—as half the world understands it—he shuddered at. If his bees were not preparing to swarm at the proper time, that world, which Rozanne had almost grown tired of talking about, was upside down for him. He stamped the garden. He left his meals unfinished just to have a look at them. In the evenings, the scent of camphor permeated the room while he went over his cases of butterflies and moths, or he would expect her to follow him round the garden with a bicycle lamp while he stumbled blindly from tree to tree, painting the bark with a mixture of rum and treacle—lure for the wandering moth.

Now, here was a man who knew the world, had seen the world, had lived in it. And he wished to be with her, to talk to her every day—*tous les jours*. With all her heart! Why not? All that quaintness, that old-world courtesy in him which had pleased the ladies of the boarding-house in Torrington Square—though it made them feel uncomfortable—fascinated her. She fell in love with him at once. He was the most charming old person she had ever met. No wonder! He was French. To her taste that accounted for it all.

They fell to talking then in right earnest and the night was drawing in and Courtot was pulling the blinds before she rose to her feet to go.

"Then you will begin the French to-morrow," said the Vicomte, taking her hand.

"I'd begin it sooner," she replied, "if there were a day in between."

"There is only the day in between," said he, "when there is nothing to look forward to in to-morrow. When will you come? In the morning I am going to begin to work upon my garden."

"Oh, of course, you've got a little garden."

"Yes."

"I suppose there was nothing of a garden in the house off Russell Square?"

"No, no; I see you don't know the neighbourhood."

"Why not?"

"That question would not have occurred to you."

"Wouldn't it? Well, you've got an apple tree in this garden—did you know that?"

"Yes."

"And it's in bloom now."

"Of course, yes, it must be."

"Then if you'll have a little table put under the apple tree to-morrow afternoon I'll come and have tea."

"That is a contract," said the Vicomte.

"Of course."

"Then now I will see you home."

"Oh, no! I'm all right by myself."

"I'll see you home," repeated the Vicomte, quietly.

"Very well, then you shall peep in at Uncle Wilfrid. But if he wants to show you his butterflies and you want to get back, put it off. It's a proceeding that takes two hours at least, and you won't get the smell of camphor out of your nose for a week."

CHAPTER VIII.

COURTOT CHOOSES A WIFE.

AND so M. le Vicomte du Guesclin came to Sunningham. He is a pessimist—a misanthrope—who complains of the country in England. Even to others than Englishmen there is nothing quite like it. Those flat, green meadows, spangled with wild flowers, cut into shapes, with their hedges of hawthorn where the birds build cunningly, they are not to be found quite the same anywhere else. The cottages,

he old inns, the red-bricked farm-houses, standing just as they did in the Tudor days, are absolutely inimitable.

After London with its fogs, its sky of roofs and gables, the country is such freedom as a bird must find, set at liberty from its narrow cage. In Sunningham, the Vicomte was another being.

But that is not only to be accounted for by the change of scene. It is not only to be accounted for by the fact that he was no longer an inmate of one of those poor-houses in which London shelters her well-to-do paupers.

Rozanne was the deeper cause. She made the echo. Through her eyes he saw himself young again. In her voice, he heard the brave note of youth. And when he held her hand, it seemed the light, quick-beating pulse of it was his.

This is the mirage, the phantom sight of the green palm trees which a man will sometimes see across the desert of years that lies behind him.

To reach that phantom oasis, he strained every step that first moment of their meeting. Courtot watched him. He, too, had seen the resemblance to her mother in Rozanne. He, too, knew the past; remembered the days when the Vicomte, a young man of twenty-eight, had spent the hours, the days of his life, to win just a few minutes in the presence of the woman he had learnt to love too late.

And it is quite possible that there is something infectious in this deceptive spirit of youth, for Courtot himself fell under the spell of it.

There lived in the village of Sunningham a widow, whose husband had been a servant in the newly-built, capacious house which lies at the edge of the Thurnham woods. There, too, until he had died, she had been mistress of the kitchen. Now, supplementing a slender pension, she did what little washing was not taken by the steam laundry in the nearest town.

When Sunningham was first thrilled by the news

that a vicomte of the French nobility—these things find outlet in some wonderful way—had come to live in the little cottage which had been empty for so long, when also it was learnt that he had brought but one servant with him, the brilliant thought occurred to Mrs. Bulpitt that he might need a cook.

She put on her best bonnet, she dressed herself in that well-known black frock, with the tassels of jet on the shoulders, which was always to be seen every Sunday in the third row of pews in the Congregational chapel, then off she went to the Vicomte's cottage.

Courtot opened the door to her timid rapping of the knocker.

"Good-morning," she said. "I want to see the Viscount."

"M. le Vicomte is at his breakfast."

"Goodness me! why, it's nearly ten o'clock. He'll have finished soon, won't he?"

"That is quite possible. For why do you wish to see him?"

"Well, I can tell him that myself, can't I?"

This was pardonable British spirit rising before imperturbable superiority. Courtot began to close the door.

"Oh, yes," he said quietly, "you can tell him. Then will you call another time?"

This conquered her. She admitted him master of the situation.

"I'm sorry," she said simply. "I didn't mean that the way you took it. Don't shut the door. I only came to know if he wanted a cook. I was cook up at Thurnham House—by Thurnham woods up there. I was cook there till my husband died. He was the butler. I thought the Viscount might want someone like that, seeing as you were the only person about the place. See what I mean?"

"Oh, yes, I understand," said Courtot. "And what age are you?"

"Forty-nine last birthday."

He asked it in such a proper spirit that she felt bound to answer him.

"Your husband is dead, you say?"

"Yes."

"Any children?"

"One son. He's in the Army. Good boy he is, too. 'Listed when he was nineteen with the Suffolks. He's been all through South Africa he has. Got three medals."

"And what religion are you?"

"Congregational."

"What is that?"

"Chapel. I go to Mr. Mathews. He's our minister."

"You know M. le Vicomte is a Roman Catholic."

"Well, I don't suppose he can help that, can he? I suppose that was the way he was brought up. I don't mind."

"And I am a Roman Catholic myself," added Courtot.

"Well, that's no reason why we shouldn't get on well together, is it? as long as you don't try and make me believe it. I couldn't believe it, you know. Goodness knows how you can. Mr. Mathews says—well, perhaps I'd better not say—but he's a good man is Mr. Mathews. I don't mind myself if you're fifty Roman Catholics. They didn't believe nothing at all up at Thurnham House, and that didn't interfere with my cooking."

Courtot looked at her quite solemnly.

"Then you think we should get on well together?" he said.

"Yes; I'm very easy—very easy indeed."

Courtot accepted the statement. There was nothing else to be done with it. He bowed.

"I will tell M. le Vicomte what you say," he said courteously. "But I am afraid myself that it is out of the question. However, I will let you know."

"Shall I wait?"

Courtot shook his head. The project that was forming in his mind did not admit of waiting. He shook his head decisively.

"I have told you M. le Vicomte is at his breakfast," he replied. "I could not speak to him about such matters now. Where do you live?"

"See that little cottage there, three doors from the sweet shop—the one with the nasturtiums—I planted them myself—see?" She pointed with a rigid finger. "That's where I live."

"Then I will come and see you when I have heard what he has to say."

He bowed, she bobbed. Then he closed the door.

When the Vicomte had finished his breakfast, Courtot cleared away. There a definite answer faced him. The Vicomte had not eaten the fish which he had cooked. No complaint was made, not a word spoken. The Vicomte was reading the paper when Courtot removed the dishes. Bearing them away into the kitchen, he took a piece of the fish from the untidy plate and put it in his mouth.

"No wonder!" he muttered, "no wonder!" The fact was obvious. Being a Frenchman did not insure his being able to cook. He had realised that before, but never so fully as now, just at this very moment when a way out of the *impasse* had just offered itself.

Without hesitation he went back to the Vicomte.

"Monsieur le Vicomte."

"What is it, Courtot?"

"I am an unmarried man, M. le Vicomte."

"Do you regret the fact, Courtot?"

"I have begun to do so, monsieur."

"Since when?"

"Since I have been here."

"You mean you have seen someone who has taken your fancy?"

Courtot bent his head as became the acknowledgment.

"Yes, monsieur."

"Oh!" The Vicomte drummed his fingers on the table. "Do I understand then that you wish to give me notice?"

"Oh, no, Monsieur le Vicomte."

"What then?"

"I have come to ask your permission."

"You want your wife to live here?"

"Yes, monsieur."

The Vicomte left his seat and walked to the window, where, with a Napoleonic attitude, he gazed out into the garden. This was a serious matter. At any other time, he would scarcely have entertained it. Now, with this mirage of his youth ever before his eyes, he could not find the heart to swing the hammer of authority and crush even so *bourgeois* a romance as this. Yet it went sorely against his taste, interfered most grievously with his habits.

"Suppose, Courtot," he said, turning suddenly round, "suppose I said that if it were really your wish to marry then you must find service elsewhere?"

Out went Courtot's hands, up went his shoulders.

"Then that would be all, M. le Vicomte."

"You mean you would go? You love this young woman?"

"No, monsieur, I mean I should stay."

That would have touched the sentiment of any man. The Vicomte came back to his chair.

"But how do you think," he said quietly, "in this small cottage we are going to put up with the noise of children? Had you thought of that?"

"It crossed my mind for a moment, M. le Vicomte."

"Well—?"

"There will be no children, monsieur."

"Oh? And what will the young woman say to that?"

"She will say nothing, monsieur," replied Courtot, solemnly. "She is forty-nine."

The old gentleman rose again and assumed his Napoleonic attitude; but it was not until his back was

turned to the room that the solemnity of his features relaxed. It was to be supposed that Courtot knew his own mind. A woman of forty-nine! His imagination flew involuntarily to Rozanne. She had come to him every day since his arrival. Every day that it had been fine they had sat together under the apple tree in the garden and talked French until the belief that he was back again in the days when Paris had been the city of his world could only be roughly shaken from him with her ultimate departure.

And Courtot, losing his heart to a woman of forty-nine! The Vicomte felt old as he thought about it. Still, it was to be supposed that he knew his own mind.

"How old are you, Courtot?" he asked, when a befitting expression of gravity had settled on his face again.

"Fifty-seven, M. le Vicomte."

"Ah, yes, yes, of course we are much the same age."

You might have thought, to hear him say it that, if anything, he was the younger of the two. They have some cunning, these old men. When a man gets past sixty, he becomes as cunning over his age as a woman who sees just thirty years behind her.

"Well, what is her name?" he inquired. "What is she?"

"Her name, Monsieur le Vicomte, will certainly be improved for the changing. At present it is Mrs. Bulpitt."

"Oh, she's a widow?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Well, let me see her. If she's coming to live here in the cottage, I think I'd better see her. I shall not be exacting, Courtot. She might be able to do something about the house. What do you think? When does she want to be married?"

"I cannot say that, monsieur, I have not asked her yet."

"Oh, *mon Dieu!* There is a proverb in English, Courtot, about the counting of chickens. Do you know it?"

"Oh, yes, monsieur, but Mrs. Bulpitt she is no chicken."

CHAPTER IX.

THE MIRAGE.

WITH all the millions of people in it, with all the crowds that throng in the streets, knocking elbows, rubbing shoulders, it is a desert, this world—a desert across which the caravans ply to some far city where there is rest.

Then what may be a caravan? Just a small company of people, knit together in a common end, bound in fellowship, joined in sympathy, in fact, just that small company of people who matter to us most in life, just those few souls whom we really know, who really make any difference, who really count when the whole sum of it all is reckoned up by the watchman at the gates of that far city of sleep.

This is a caravan, and of all the myriads of other human beings who come and go, pass in and pass out, it may merely be said—they are grains of sand in this great stretch of the desert of Existence across which our own particular little caravan of souls goes wearily or gaily, slowly or fast to its journey's end.

It is a safe enough journey after all. Storms there are, no doubt, but they can be weathered. A stout heart will face them through. But it is the mirage—that dazzling, tempting semblance of the phantom oasis—which is the most subtle danger of all. When once it rises in the mind's eye, when once it grasps the ready credence of the brain, there are few indeed who will not leave all—the beating heat of the sun,

the aching monotony of the way—to find the shade of those palm trees which vanish—vanish—vanish the nearer you approach.

"It's a mirage! it's a mirage!" the others cry to you. "Come back, it's only a mirage."

But your heart has gone out, your eyes have seen. You will not, you must not, you cannot disbelieve, and, parting from them all, you run with hastening eager steps. There it is before you, only a mile or so away. Those deep green shadows under the palms, that gurgling of water in the well, you can feel it cool on your brow as you hurry onward, you can taste in your nostrils the scent of the cool green growing things in the heart of this dry desert of dust.

And you run, and you run, and you run. And the sun dips away behind the hills of sand, and the world shivers as the twilight stretches out her tapering fingers, and then, suddenly, your eyes are empty, the oasis has gone. And all that is left is the limitless, trackless desert and the night.

When M. le Vicomte du Guesclin—that old nobleman of a *régime* which France has seen the end of and the whole world will find to vanish all too soon—when he first saw Rozanne that evening, as he stood in the hall of his little cottage, it was to him that sudden glimpse of the mirage when those who first behold it stop, hands shading the eyes, heart beating in the breath, afraid to believe, afraid to understand.

So great was her resemblance to the woman whom he had loved, so like her poise of the head, so like her little trick of the voice—even to the childish stammering on an odd word here and there—far enough apart to let you forget it, quaint enough to let it charm you each time that it came—so identical were they, that it is not to be wondered at that he was tricked.

He had told her to come the next day, and the next. That talking of French was only his excuse. True, it helped the illusion all the more; it made that little

garden of his, with its knotted apple tree and its clusters of straggling roses, the stately gardens of Versailles, where, with her mother, nearly twenty years before, he had wandered and talked of the things that might have been.

But added to all that now—added and making the whole seem wonderful—there lurked in the corner of his heart a silently-growing belief that now this was not in vain. These were not the things that might have been; these were the things that yet could be.

One difficulty lay in the way—one insurmountable difficulty. He was too poor. There was nothing he possessed which, in his idea of chivalry, was fit offer to a woman from any man.

It was a strain upon that slender purse of his to pay Courtot his wages at the end of the first month. And what, he asked himself, would a wife be, if it were an effort to pay his servant? He had grown accustomed to deprivations for himself, but when he thought of Rozanne as his wife, all his thoughts flew back to the days of luxury that had passed.

What would she think of him if he offered her a herring for breakfast? He could take it himself, badly cooked by Courtot, and eat it with an air as if it were the daintiest dish out of all the kitchens in France. But he knew that was impossible with a wife for audience. Pride is the last sentiment you may hope to assume with effect before a wife.

They thought he was rich, but that was another matter. Everyone in the village believed him to be well-to-do. He fostered the idea. There was no pride in his mind to be poor.

When, for instance, Rozanne's uncle first came to see him, he opened one of the three bottles of wine which he had brought with him—saved from the wreck of his fortunes in France.

All those two years in the boarding-house in Torrington Square he had kept them nailed up in their

wooden case thinking, "One day—one day perhaps it will seem well if I can produce a bottle of wine like that."

And the day had come. The bottle had been produced. He had felt the wrench of it when Courtot drew out the cork.

"If wine were to be had like this now," he had said as he held up his glass to the light, "we should have all the wit of France back again in the place of its blasphemy."

Old Mr. Somerset had gone away with the taste of it lingering on his palate, and looking at Rozanne over the dinner-table he had said, in his practical British way—though in life he was the most unpractical of men you could find—"A man who can afford to keep wine like that, Rozanne," he had said, "and bring it out when you make a casual call upon him, must be fairly substantial. I can't touch my sherry after it. It's like water out of a ditch."

And did you tell him that M. le Vicomte had a capital of seventeen pounds in the Crédit Lyonnais bank, that an income of one hundred pounds a year was all that came in to him, he would have pointed to that bottle of wine and refused to believe it.

And so the Vicomte passed as a wealthy member of Sunningham society. In the village, Courtot never contradicted it. To Mrs. Bulpitt he spoke proudly of his master's lavish extravagance; but of his conversations with her, more has yet to be told. We are gazing at the mirage now, gazing at it with the Vicomte's eyes—the mirage of his youth which stands out into the light, just that tempting mile or so away, across the desert of years which lay behind him.

Every afternoon at four o'clock—under the apple tree in the garden if it were fine, or in the house if the weather forbade it—Rozanne came and they talked—of nothing at all if the truth were known; but to the Vicomte those two hours, until six o'clock, were

charged with noble things that found their way into speech. He was flowery, perhaps; no doubt he was grandiloquent. Yet it seemed natural enough in him. You would have expected it had you seen him.

He confessed to Rozanne his weakness for writing verse. She listened, full of sympathetic interest. Anything that rhymed pleased her. But he thought, as she delivered it, that her appreciation was the more worth winning than any praise of critics of the pen.

After that first evening, when he had seen her, framed in the doorway, her eyes lighting his way back to memories which he had thought were dead, he had written a verse in his little notebook, which by then was all but filled.

One afternoon, under the apple tree, when the first petals of the apple blossom were beginning to drop, circling and fluttering to the ground, he found courage to read it to her.

"I used to write verse sometimes for your mother," he had said, playing with the leaves of the notebook between his fingers, pretending to be unable to find the place.

"How wonderful," she had replied, and there was that far-off look in her eyes as when a child tries to gaze into a time it has never known. "That's nearly thirty years ago." He shut his eyes.

They were calling him back again. "It's a mirage, it's all a mirage," they were saying, but he only closed his eyes.

Then she took her eyes back from the distance and brought them to his.

"I wonder will anyone ever write verses for me?" she had questioned.

"But these are for you, little cousin."

"Yes—I know—but I mean—"

She could not read the look that had passed across his face. There, she had seen it, yet, utterly ignorant of its meaning, she had instinctively checked herself.

"Oh, yes, I know—" and her sentence had fallen to a whisper.

He leant forward in his chair nearer her.

"You mean someone not old like me, eh?"

She looked up quickly, sensitive that she had hurt him.

"But you are not old. Why do you always insist that you are so old?"

"For fear that you should think me so, Rozanne."

"And is that why you always want me to call you cousin, instead of M. le Vicomte?"

He smiled.

"I suppose it is."

"Well, I will. But you look more like a vicomte than a cousin."

"Ah, that is my white hair and my wrinkled face, eh?"

"There! You are doing it again—cousin. Is that what my mother always called you?"

"Sometimes. Not—quite—always."

She tried to catch all the meaning in that subtle inflection in his voice. Meaning there was, surely? The woman's instinct in her told her that; but the child in her—she was no more than a child—could not frame it into words.

"I love to hear you talk about my mother," she said wistfully, the first expression of the instinct to wheedle it all out of him, steal from him the secret of the romance which she knew must be there. Then she caught sight of his fingers playing patiently with the leaves of his notebook and generosity thrust all other thoughts aside. "But you haven't read me the verses," she said eagerly. "The first verses that anybody ever wrote for me. Do read them, please!"

He spread the book out slowly on his knee. Perhaps he did not want to read them after all, she thought; but she had not the knowledge of him which Courtot possessed. It would have taken long years of

close watching to have ever seen that M. le Vicomte du Guesclin could be mastered by any emotion so *bourgeois* as that of eagerness.

He coughed gently behind his hand, brushed his moustache with a deep-coloured silk handkerchief and began to read:

"If I could tell the Fate that brings
The fruit upon the apple tree
Too late in gentle murmurings
To woo the blossom on the pear;
Then surely I could tell to thee
Why thou hast struck a chord that sings
And mingles all Love's melody
With all of Life's despair."

"That's lovely!" she exclaimed when he had finished. "But isn't it terribly sad? Why should you say life is so full of despair when love is so full of melody?"

"Have you ever been in love?" he asked.

"No."

"And how old are you? But then I know."

"I'm twenty."

"Then why should you be surprised who only know life for twenty years and have never been in love?"

"Yes, I know." She looked up with a smile. "I don't suppose I'm really qualified to say anything. But it sounds very despondent."

"Despondent?" He sat erect. "No—surely not!"

"I think it is."

"But I'm never despondent."

"Never?"

"No—oh, no—it is *bourgeois* to be despondent."

"Don't you think you were just a little bit when you wrote that? But perhaps despondency is a poetic licence. That's right, isn't it? There are such things. But I wish you wouldn't make use of them. I always

think of you as so happy. Always cheerful—always in good spirits."

He folded the pocket-book and put it away.

"What makes you think that? Is it because you always see me when I am just seeing you? Why do you think I should be always so cheerful?"

"Well, you've got nothing to worry you. You're very well off. I expect if Uncle Wilfrid were half as well off he'd be twice as cheerful as he is. Oh, there are lots of reasons why you should always be in good spirits."

A smile—you could not say whether it were bitter or not—twitched the corner of the Vicomte's lips.

"And that I'm rich is one of them?" he said.

"Yes. You live in this little cottage, of course, but then you don't want any more room than that, do you?"

"No, it's quite big enough for my demands. They are not very exacting."

"Well, then"—she rose with a laugh to her feet—"I don't think you ought even to take the poet's licence of despondency. It wasn't made for you. Only for poor poets who work in garrets and never see the sun. Why have I struck a chord that sings so sad a tune as that? Why shouldn't it sing something happy instead?"

"Would you like it to, Rozanne?" He stood up and took her hand.

"Yes, of course I would."

It was quite an easy matter to persuade himself that she understood—quite an easy matter. He did it without the slightest hesitation.

"I will, then," he said; "I will. The next verses I write for you shall be what I'm only too willing they should be—little cousin."

CHAPTER X.

MRS. BULPITT.

MRS. BULPITT was sitting at the parlour window, the top of her head just rising above the leaves of the three geranium plants that stood on the low window-sill. She was mending a garment of underwear—called in more effective language, *lingerie*—and applied to more effective creations than that which was being submitted to her needle. It was not a fascinating garment. As a Congregationalist, it became her; but as a woman—no!

A flounce—no other name could be given it—surrounding the termination of the garment itself was threatening to become separated from the main structure. Mrs. Bulpitt was rejoining it with stitches such as the texture of the material demanded.

She was bent over her work, engrossed in it, when the clatter of the little wicket gate at the foot of that narrow piece of ground she called her front garden reached her ears. She sat up hastily and peered out. It was the man-servant from the cottage where the Viscount lived.

Driving her needle hastily into the material, she concealed it under the cushion of the chair on which she was sitting and ran to the mantelpiece to tidy her hair in the mirror. There was one place between the many flaws which the glass contained where she could see herself quite well. She found it by instinct. Her hands moved swiftly about her head, pushing in pins, tucking away stray locks that were loose.

A whole week had passed by since that morning when she had made her application for the situation of cook at the cottage, and she had begun to be afraid that success was past hoping for. Now, undoubtedly, this visit meant business. She dragged a clean white apron out of a cupboard in the wall, tied it about her

waist and walked to the door, with pulses beating, in answer to Courtot's knock.

"May I come in, Mrs. Bulpitt?"

She held the door wide in answer.

"Walk inside, please, Mr. ——. I don't know your name, and I don't suppose I could pronounce it if I did."

Courtot allowed his features to relax. He smiled.

"My name is Courtot," he replied.

She closed the door.

"Courtot." She nodded. "Well, as long as you don't spell it for me, I expect it's all right. Sounds easy enough. Won't you come into the parlour, Mr. Courtot? It's very untidy—you musn't mind that. I was just doing a piece of sewing—"

"Ah! you sew, with the needle?"

Here was another accomplishment needed in the Vicomte's household.

"I like to see a woman sew," he added.

"Yes, every man does. My husband used to say it kept me quiet. Won't yer sit down?"

Courtot laid his hat on the table and seated himself.

"I do not wish that you should stop your sewing because I am here," he said politely.

She sat firmly into the chair under the cushion of which the garment was reposing and declared that she had no intention of doing any more just then.

"Any case," she added, "I suppose you've come here because you've got something to tell me. I'd almost given up thinking about it, it's that long since I came up to the cottage to speak about it."

Courtot settled himself more easily in his seat.

"Well," he began slowly, for the matter needed tact, "it is like this. You say like this?"

"I didn't; you did."

"Ah, yes, but I mean, is that right? Does one say —like this—it is like this? *Comme ca!*"

"Oh, I don't understand," she said, bewildered;

"go on with what you were saying. 'It's like this,' you said. Well, what is it like?"

Courtot smiled with relief. "*Eh, bien!* I was right. Well, it is like this. M. le Vicomte du Guesclin—" He paused. It is hard enough to tell a good lie at all times, but when the matter has to be accomplished in a language other than one's own, the affair becomes worthy of the skill of an equilibrist.

"M. le Vicomte du Guesclin," he continued meditatively, "like all men who are great, has his peculiarities. He does not like women servants. In Paris—in the days of the *ancien régime*—" He laid his hand dramatically on his breast. By the expression on Mrs. Bulpitt's face he saw that she was impressed. But she did not understand a word he was saying. He gained confidence from that.

"In the days of the *ancien régime*," he continued, "M. le Vicomte had none but men-servants. In his house in the Avenue Kléber there were six of them, all in my charge. He has been used to such a household as that all his life. You, who live here, you do not know, you have no—what is it?—conception of the days of the last Empire in France. You live in this little cottage—two rooms—it is comfortable—*mais oui*—but it makes you that you do not understand. The *salons* in Paris! Ah, *mon Dieu!* you think your church here—this what you say—*congregationale* affair—it seems big—" Steadily he was lifting himself into enthusiasm. Now he could not speak without gesticulation. "It seems big to you," he continued, and his arms encompassed a vast area which made the matter infinitely more comprehensive, "but compared to the *salons*—ah! it is—" He brought his hands together and screwed up his lips to show how small it was.

"And it is to places such as these," he went on, "that M. le Vicomte has been accustomed, where you will only see men-servants from one room to another."

Mrs. Bulpitt's mouth had been slowly opening in

wonder. The enthusiasm of a Frenchman is at least descriptive. He can transform the parlour of a workman's cottage into a palatial chamber by the mere sweeping gesture of his arm. Undoubtedly Mrs. Bulpitt was impressed. She had understood very little of what had been said to her; but the fact that the houses to which the Vicomte had been accustomed had had rooms which were infinitely larger than the hall of her Congregational chapel had found its way home. She understood it all from that.

"Then," she said, dejectedly, "it simply means that he doesn't want me, eh?"

"It means"—Courtot shrugged his shoulders dejectedly too—"that M. le Vicomte does not want a cook."

"Because he doesn't want a woman in the house?"

"Ah, I would not say that—I would not say that. As a servant—no—certainly not; but supposing, Mrs. Bulpitt, only supposing I were to get married—sometimes I think of it. Sometimes it seems a wise thing that I might do. Then I should come to M. le Vicomte and I should say, 'M. le Vicomte.' 'Yes, Courtot,' he would say. 'I think that it might be wise, M. le Vicomte, if I were to marry.' And he would say, '*Eh, bien! si vous voulez.*'"

"What's that mean?" she asked with deepening interest.

"It means 'Oh, just as you like.'"

"And he'd let your wife live in the house?"

"Oh, yes; but why not? Certainly, if I made promise that there would be no children. The cottage is small. M. le Vicomte would not allow there to be children. But a woman who was my wife—oh, yes."

Mrs. Bulpitt looked at him with speculating eyes.

"Then I suppose you'll marry some day?" she said.

He gazed out of the window, over the heads of the three geranium plants. A farmer's waggon was rumbling with a heavy noise down the little street. He did not notice it. There was a tender look in his

eyes such as no farmer's waggon could ever inspire. Ah, there is no doubt of it, however *bourgeois* he may be, an understanding of women runs in the blood of a Frenchman. He knows to a fraction of time that moment when even so slight an instinct as curiosity will make her susceptible.

"I wonder you haven't married before," she continued, watching Courtot's face. He let her wonder. This was not the moment to speak. The more she wondered that, the more she would be attracted to the possibility of marrying him herself. He steadily persisted in looking fondly through that little window as though, before his eyes, there were passing a whole pageant of romance.

The curiosity then to know what he was thinking about, if he were thinking of her, became absorbing. She fidgeted in her seat.

"You're very quiet all of a sudden," she said. "Won't you have a cup of tea? I make very nice tea. Course, I suppose it's no good my hoping to get cook at the Viscount's now, not after what you've said. But that's no reason why we shouldn't have a cup of tea together. I don't bear any ill-will. 'Tisn't as if you could help it."

Courtot watched her pensively as she rose from her chair and went to the cupboard where the cups and saucers were kept.

"You are a good woman, Mrs. Bulpitt," he said, as with a sudden moment of enthusiasm. "You are a good woman. Can you believe—ah, *mon Dieu!* how I suffered when I came here this afternoon? I say to myself, 'Mrs. Bulpitt, she will be so cross—she will be *so* cross when she knows,' I keep on saying to myself. *Bien!* I come and tell you, and you say, 'Will you 'ave some tea? I bear not any ill-will. It is not as it were your fault.' You make me proud. I—I—" Up went the shoulders—oh! charmingly done! "I am fond of you. You are—too good."

Now Mr. Bulpitt had never wooed like this. It

needs a skill that is not in the temperament of this country to see qualities in a woman which she does not possess and woo her with the praise of them. We are a fault-finding people, the best of us. When we can love, despite the faults we find, that, certainly, is to our credit; but discover them we must.

Mrs. Bulpitt was unused to such subtle ingenuity as this. She warmed under Courtot's praise. Her face beamed and she passed to the fireplace to make the tea, remarking that it was very kind of him and that he must make himself at home.

"I expect it's very lonely with the old gentleman at the cottage, isn't it?" she asked presently. She made the remark, eyes searching to the fire, thinking that if he did not see her face, he would fail to discover the hidden motive in what she said. It was the best conception of tact she possessed. As she poked up the fire underneath the kettle she really considered that she had been very clever. But then she was dealing with a clever man. She had the sense to know that.

Courtot stroked his clean-shaven upper lip with a steady hand.

"Is it more lonely," he asked, "than it must be for you here, with no one?"

She looked round. She had never thought of this before. Why had it never occurred to her that it was lonely to sit evening after evening by the fire, until the knitting pins were laid down quietly in her lap, and her eyes, gazing in a wandering of ideas at the glowing ashes, closed gently and she knew it must be time to go to bed? Why had she never realised before that she must be very lonely?

"Do you know, I suppose it must be," she said with conviction, "I suppose it must be lonely." She stood up abruptly. "Well, if you like to come in of an evening, I don't see no harm why we shouldn't keep each other company. You can smoke if you like. I'm not one of those as objects to it. I like the aroma-r of tobacco."

Then they sat down to tea, and for five minutes neither of them could think of a word to say to each other.

"I make this bread myself, Mr. Courtot," Mrs. Bulpitt said at last. "How do you like it?"

"You make it yourself!"

"Haven't I just said I did?"

This clinched the matter. There was no doubt left in Courtot's mind.

"I must come to tea again then," he said.

"Come as often as you like, you're always welcome. You mustn't think it forward of me"—she smiled, quite a girlish smile, in which youth flickered like the flame of a candle—"but it's nice for me to have someone to talk to. I'd a' gone on here never thinking I was lonely, if it hadn't 'a been for what you said. I like the way you say things, I do, 'pon me word."

And as she stretched forward to take his cup their hands touched and she laughed with a little jerk in her throat.

Oh, it was quite pretty in its way. She had caught a glimpse of the mirage too. Her sight was not quite so young, her hearing not so keen, as they used to be. But there was no doubt of it in that moment. She could see the shadows of the palm trees; she could hear the gurgling of cool water in the well.

And she simpered as she picked up the cup, simpered just as she would have done twenty—thirty years before, and felt the younger and the happier for such foolishness.

CHAPTER XI.

"SONGS OF YESTERDAY"

WHEN a man takes it upon himself to fall in love with a girl who is forty years younger than himself he absorbs some reflex of the spirit of youth which filters into his blood as the sunshine falls

in patches through the blinds into some darkened room. Parts of him are lighted up by it. Parts of him are invigorated. Yet they bear but little relation to the entire man. They impel him to actions at which the more mellow, the more subdued side of his nature stands aghast.

M. le Vicomte was poor. As a poor man he knew that marriage was forbidden him. But when Rozanne listened to those fragile little verses which he read to her from his notebook, when she declared them wonderful and complete—just because they happened to rhyme and jingle prettily in her ears—the reflection of that spirit of youth fell in a brilliant patch of light upon the Vicomte's mind and lit him to an ambition at which reason, in its sombre shadow of sixty years, looked on in pained surprise.

He determined to publish a book of poems.

You should have seen him every evening after that decision had been made; oh, you should have seen him!

He sat at the table in the parlour of the cottage, collecting all his scraps of paper together, sorting them into sonnets or lyrics, rondels or triolets, numbering each page and pinning them together.

"It may bring me in quite a lot of money, Courtot," he said one evening. "You know, of course, that it costs nothing—or so I believe—nothing at all to publish a book. The publisher sees to that. He takes the risk. Of course I must ask somebody about this business. I am not quite sure myself how it is done. I knew a good many young literary men in Paris once upon a time; but I never asked them really how they set to work to get a book published. There must be some proper way of doing it, you know. It costs nothing to the author. I'm quite sure of that. But whether he takes a sum down or accepts royalties —that is what it is called—royalties—whether he does that I am not quite certain. I am inclined to think, Courtot," he added, "I am inclined to think that I should take a sum down."

Here was the mellowed reason of sixty years prompting the enthusiasm of twenty. If it had been possible for the sunlight of youth to have flooded the whole of his being, up would have gone that book of poems to the publisher like a rocket. You would have heard no talk of business, no whisper of doing things properly. To get it there, to get it into print, that would have been the attitude of mind of the boy of twenty.

"Now what would you think I ought to ask, Courtot?" he questioned, looking up, as he pinned the last sheet of the bundle of triolets. "What would you think would be a reasonable sum? I calculate that the book will be published at five shillings net. Net, I think, means that there is no mistake about being five shillings. I shall have it bound in white parchment with covers that flap over and are tied with white silk ribbons which are laced through the binding. I fancy, too, it would look nice if the paper were hand-made—cream hand-made. I like those rough, untrimmed edges. They must be trimmed at the top, of course, and gilt. But five shillings net would be a reasonable price for such a book as that. Think of the number of people who would be attracted by the appearance of such a book in a bookseller's shop and —and buy it. I should myself, of course—I certainly should myself if I could spare the money. Now what sum would you think I ought to take down for a book bound like that?"

Courtot smoothed his hair back over his head and thought seriously. He thought of the number of people in England, vaguely estimating them at some millions. Dividing that vaguely in half to allow for those who would not be tempted by the binding—it became some thousands. Multiplying that by five produced another indefinite total which might reasonably be called fifty thousand shillings. Fifty thousand shillings were—his brain staggered—were two thousand five hundred pounds. For some

unaccountable reason—mainly perhaps because of the colossal proportions of the sum—he divided that again in half and said:

"About one thousand two hundred and fifty pounds, M. le Vicomte."

The old gentleman looked pleased. A gleam of hopeful credulity for one moment lit upon his face, but the sombre reason of his sixty years could not permit him to accept it.

"No, that is too much, Courtot," he said. "But it is very hard to know. So I think I shall decide upon the royalty system."

On the royalty system then he detrmined, and the book of poems was sent up to London. Courtot made up the parcel. Rozanne tied the string, and the Vicomte wrote the address in his thin, spidery handwriting. He had looked up the names of publishers in one or two books on Mr. Somerset's shelves in the library at the Red House, and decided upon one which he considered most suitable in sound to be the publisher of his book of verse.

Songs of Yesterday, was the title he gave it, and on the fly leaf, underneath the dedication to my cousin, Rozanne, was the following triolet:

"This little book of verse of mine
Sets sail—it is my argosy.
And if I ask thee—call it thine—
This little book of verse of mine,
I cannot hope thou wilt divine
How much its treasure means to me.
This little book of verse of mine
Sets sail—it is my argosy."

"And what is an argosy?" Rozanne had asked when he had read it to her.

"An argosy?" In that moment he had been inspired. "An argosy, my little cousin, is a phantom

merchant ship that all the world waits for. It rides the seas just behind that line of vision which is called the horizon."

"Then no one ever sees it?"

"No. No one ever sees it."

CHAPTER XII.

THE CONGREGATIONALIST MINISTER.

IT came to this—and Courtot, no doubt, had meant it should—that the entire village was unanimous in its belief that Mrs. Bulpitt had set her heart upon the Viscount's man-servant.

Every Sunday morning, just at about the time when Courtot would be coming back from Mass—a time which fortunately did not interfere with her own devotions in the Congregational chapel—Mrs. Bulpitt might have been seen making her way along the high road that led to the town of Maidlow, which lay just a mile and a half to the east of Sunningham. In her black-gloved hand she gripped the hymn book which had been in use at her own service. The three little wires adorned with jet beads—in the shape of a somewhat lean aigrette—jerked in a staccatoed way from the crown of her black bonnet, and, lying limply in the shadow of them, was an orange-coloured flower, the one piece of vivid colour in her attire.

When on the first occasion she saw Courtot in the distance, her heart beat very irregularly under her black cape. She wished she had not come. He would think she was too forward. He would think she was setting her cap at him. In that moment she would have given her three geranium plants to have been able to turn and run back into Sunningham; but it was so many years since she had run a

step, and if he were to recognise her, what would he think?

It was incumbent upon her to face it out then; so on she walked. She would not show the slightest hesitation when they met. He should not think she had come out on purpose to meet him. It would not be difficult. Men were easily deceived.

And when he did stop before her with his hat so gallantly raised and his head so graciously bent—as they do do it in any country but this—she came to a standstill, just as if it were what she had been hoping for, what she had been looking for and had found at last.

"This is quite a pleasant surprise," she said. It was her best effort of deception at the moment. She had meant to explain how she was going into Maidlow to see a young woman who was sick; but you have to reach the first faint suspicion of belief in your lie before you can tell it with any conviction. Mrs. Bulpitt had not had time for that. The words caught round her tongue, and so, "This is quite a pleasant surprise," was all she had said in her effort to deceive him.

Then back into Sunningham they had walked together, and the little group of men seated on the benches outside the Crooked Billet had nudged each other with their elbows as they passed.

It would be wrong to say that public opinion drove her to it. Public opinion truly is a stern master, who will not be denied his sacrifice; but Mrs. Bulpitt was a willing victim.

One misgiving she had in her mind—Courtot was a Roman Catholic. That weighed upon her, and more because he was a good Catholic than a bad one.

"There'd be more hope for him if he was not what you might call conscientious," she whispered in confidence to a bosom friend of hers, who repeated the entire conversation soon afterwards, "but he

goes to that church of his in Maidlow as regular as a clock every Sunday. I think I'd better speak to Mr. Mathews about it, because any day now he might ask me, and I'm sure as I should say yes, just without thinking like."

So it was that Mr. Mathews, the Congregationalist minister, became the recipient of her confidences. She beat about the bush first—women do, some with the fine point of a willow switch, but there are few of these.

"You once said something about Catholics in a sermon, Mr. Mathews," she began. "Are they really as bad as that?"

The minister looked cautiously at her. What he had said in the momentary enthusiasm of a sermon might not of necessity be wise to repeat in the cooler moments of conversation He stroked his long, uncombed moustache, which, with his hollow cheeks and deep-set eyes, gave him so close a resemblance to a rabid sea-lion.

"I have never held that Catholics were bad, Mrs. Bulpitt," he said emphatically. He used the word "held" with conscious intention. It gave an air of matured consideration to his statement which he felt sure would impress her.

"To my mind there is no reason, Mrs. Bulpitt," he continued magnanimously. "why a Catholic should not lead as excellent a life as any one; though I feel compelled to say, from convictions which I have not allowed to possess me lightly, that the doctrine of the Church of Rome is one which—which cannot lead one to the truest or the noblest motives in life."

It is not really so difficult a matter to convince a washerwoman of Mrs. Bulpitt's intelligence that a pholosophy which has faced out some nineteen hundred years is wrong at the core. Mr. Mathews was quite sure of his audience. He watched the dropping of her jaw with inner satisfaction.

"Do you think it would be wrong then for a person to marry a Catholic?" she asked.

"Ah, that all depends. Is the Catholic a man or a woman?"

She hesitated. She tightened her bonnet-strings.

"He's a man," she said, shifting the weight of her body from one foot to the other.

"Oh, and what religion is the other party?"

"Well, I've heard, Mr. Mathews, as she's chapel, same as me. Leastways, that's what I'm told."

The minister looked at her sententiously, hiding his smile under that walrus moustache of his.

"Then I think, Mrs. Bulpitt," he said, 'seeing that it's the woman who is the Congregationalist, and that it is always the woman in the house who has the greatest power of persuasion in the matter of religion, I think I should marry him if I were you."

He hurried away, chuckling at his cleverness, and the good woman stood gaping after him.

"Well, how he guessed is a wonder to me," she said aloud. "Somebody must have told him."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PROPOSAL.

THE formal proposal took place in the little parlour of Mrs. Bulpitt's cottage. She was making a piece of toast on the prongs of an ordinary table fork. Courtot said she must be burning her hand. She declared she was not, and added that it made little difference if she were, since she was making the toast for him.

Then he tried to take the fork from her, gallantly,

but not to be denied. She held to it. He held to her hand. It was a rough, coarse hand, shrivelled with the work of many a washtub; but had it been the hand of the Empress of France, he could not have raised it more graciously to his lips. She watched its journey with reverent wonder. Never in the whole period of their courting, in the whole course of their married life, had Mr. Bulpitt ever kissed her hands. At times he had told her to clean them. This Mr. Courtot was a wonderful man. Such manners! She dropped the toasting-fork. She felt she ought to drop him a curtsey. She had a picture on her wall, cut from the cover of the Christmas number of an illustrated paper; it was of a gallant kissing a lady's hand in the gavotte. She was bowing. Mrs. Bulpitt cast the corner of her eye at the picture, but when she felt his lips touch the back of her hand, she simply said:

"Oh, Mr. Courtot. Oh, what am I to say?"

"Say what will make me the happiest of men in the world," he whispered.

"And what's that?" She looked into his eyes as he lifted his head from the bunched-up fingers that he held. But that was more than she could withstand. Nobody had ever looked at her quite like that before. With a deep sigh that strained and creaked the stiffening of her best bodice, she leant forward in the most uncomfortable of attitudes and laid her head on his shoulder—just as much a romantic at forty-nine as she had ever been in her life.

"Oh, I never thought of this," she whispered, "I never thought of this."

She had thought of nothing else; but no woman will ever be stopped at the gates of heaven for telling a lie.

He took her in his arms then, creaking best bodice and all; and perhaps the thought that now M. le

Vicomte would have his meals well cooked was scarcely appreciable to his mind. In the moment of conquest a man is too flattered by victory to think of why he strove.

So ended the wooing of Mrs. Bulpitt.

In twenty-five days the whole feat had been accomplished. Courtot had broken down every obstacle, even that serious matter of his religion. She agreed to be married in his church as well as her own.

"Musn't let him have anything to face me with afterwards," she told herself; by which it may be seen that the good lady had not completely failed to strain experience from wedded life. "I've no doubt he'll be coming to chapel with me next summer," she continued hopefully. "God bless him, he's that nice. I don't believe I care if he don't."

That evening Courtot walked back in an emotional ecstasy of mind to the unromantic duty of cooking two sausages for the Vicomte's dinner.

As he passed round the back of the house to the kitchen entrance, he kept his eyes rigidly before him. The old gentleman was sitting with Rozanne under the apple tree. Long ago they had finished tea. He had served it himself at half-past four when he had gone out. Yet seeing, without looking—a trick of the senses when curiosity concentrates more vividly than sight—he had observed the Vicomte pick up his cup and lift it to his lips. It was meant to convey that they were still taking their tea, that they had not quite finished yet, that that was the reason why they were still sitting under the apple tree.

When a man has just come fresh from his own wooing, he notices such little things as these without looking at them.

A few moments later they came back into the

house. Courtot heard them in the square-roomed hall as he laid the table for dinner in the parlour.

"I think I'm going to stay to dinner with you this evening," he heard Rozanne remark.

The blood ran cold in him. Surely the Vicomte must know. He would not permit it. Two sausages! He had ordered them himself. The Vicomte liked sausages. They were not expensive. They were easy to cook, moreover.* He laid a fork gently on the table and strained his ears for the Vicomte's reply.

"You will stay and dine with me?"

There was fear in his voice certainly, but there was eagerness too. Courtot caught the high note of it. There was no mistake. The perspiration broke out on his forehead. *Mon Dieu!* It would be disgrace! Yet what a pity, what a shame! Why should she not stay to dinner? There were still two bottles of the wine. If only there were something suitable to eat! *Cutlets a la Ravigotte.* *Filet mignon.* Anything.

His hand went to his pocket; he counted out his money into an open palm. Three shillings and eightpence! *Sacrê!* It was very little. If M. le Vicomte had only paid him his wages for the first month of his service! Three and eightpence was all that he had in the world. But it would buy cutlets; and then, if he knew how to make a sweet. Ah, Mrs. Bulpitt!—his Mrs. Bulpitt!

What were they saying now?

"Are you sure Mr. Somerset will not be—be vexed?" the Vicomte had asked.

Ah, the moment of eagerness was over now. The old gentleman was beginning to realise the impossibility of it all. But why should it be impossible? Why should anything be impossible with Mrs. Bulpitt? First, before heaven, she was a

* They are not, as a matter of fact. But this only argues the poverty of Courtot's skill in the art

cook! The incidental fact that she was to be his wife only made the whole affair more reasonable to his mind. But she was a cook! To-night, she should be an artist!

Now what were they saying? Mademoiselle Rozanne was persuading him that her uncle liked to be alone. She was telling him that even when she was there he read at the table, read books on—oh! some terrible name, it did not matter what. It did not matter in the least. How could M. le Vicomte avoid it now? And Courtot knew well enough how little he wished to say her no.

All those days in Paris—nearly twenty years ago—when that lady with the red-brown hair and the eyes as blue as the china vases that stood on the mantelpiece of the house in the Avenue Kléber had come to see M. le Vicomte, had brought him roses and filled those very vases herself—all the memory of them came back to Courtot's mind.

One evening especially he recalled when, coming in to announce that M. le Vicomte's meal was served, he had heard his master say:

"Stay, will you, Rozanne, stay? Have one meal with me. Let me see you sitting opposite me just once."

And, forgetting that Courtot was there, she had laid her hand on the Vicomte's shoulder and said:

"If I stayed once, Phillippe, how could I bear it not to stay always?"

Courtot had never forgotten that. And now, here was history repeating itself. But instead of asking, M. le Vicomte was being asked, and Courtot knew that in his heart he was thinking he must refuse.

He should not refuse!

"Courtot!"

"Yes, M. le Vicomte."

The old gentleman hurried into the parlour.

"What is there for dinner, Courtot?" he whis-

pered. "Would it be possible that I could ask Mademoiselle Rozanne to stay?"

"Oh, yes, monsieur!" Courtot shook out an emphatic affirmative. "Oh, yes!"

"There is enough, do you think?"

"*Mais oui! Absolument!*"

"What is there? What is there? Tell me what there is."

"Oh, M. le Vicomte, you can trust me, you can trust me. There will be enough. *Il sera prêt tout de suite!*"

"And the cooking, Courtot, you will be careful? You—you—I don't want to say that you cook badly, but you—you won't burn anything?"

"M. le Vicomte"—he stood erect with his hand on his breast, swallowing something that rose in his throat—"I may not be a good cook, but you shall have a good dinner." His eyes flashed with the truth of it, and, what is most wonderful of all, is that M. le Vicomte believed him.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DINNER.

THERE is something about the excitement attaching itself to the impossible, which makes the impossible so well worth doing.

What, in the name of heaven, would have seemed more outrageous to the menial English mind than that a dinner fit for the entertainment of a romance, should be furnished out of nowhere, on nothing more nor less than three and eightpence, and that within half an hour?

First of all, the romance would have been no reason in itself; and secondly—combining every argument

unto the very last—the thing would have been impossible.

But these two were the very reasons which attracted Courtot to its accomplishment.

The moment that the Vicomte had rejoined Rozanne, he slipped into the kitchen, piled coals upon the fire, crept out of the back door, hurried through the garden and sped down the village street to Mrs. Bulpitt's cottage.

In answer to the hurried knock, the good lady came running to the door.

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! what is it?" she gasped.

Courtot took her in his arms and kissed her three times in rapid succession. This is the approved-of way if you would win a favour of any woman. Kiss her first; she knows you love her then, and that idea becomes inextricably mixed in her mind with the favour when you ask it.

"*Ma cherie!*" he exclaimed. He was out of breath. A hundred yards is no mean distance to run when one is over fifty. Then he told her everything, which is to say he told her everything that he meant her to know.

He had to cook a dinner—ah! he could tell a story could this Courtot. The more impromptu it was, the more readily his wits would gather for the effort. He had to cook a dinner, and he, *mon Dieu!* he was, really no cook at all. Mademoiselle Somerset had been asked to stay to dinner at a moment's notice. They had never had visitors to dine before, and it was as much as his place was worth.

"Oh, *ma cherie!*" he wound up in an ecstasy of untruth, "if you will but come and help me, no one need know; M. le Vicomte, he never comes into the kitchen, and I shall be saved."

In all her fluster of excitement, she realised that he had called her something which she did not understand.

"Well, tell me what it means," she said, "what it means when you call me *ma* something or other?"

He threw his arms about her, laughing with delight. "What it means? *Ma cherie?* Oh, *mon Dieu!* what does it mean? Yes, yes! My darling! My darling! And you will come now—now at once?"

"Wait till I get my hat."

Five minutes later, Courtot was smuggling her into the kitchen. Sweetbreads and cutlets had been secured at the butcher's, various other things at the little confectioner's, also the dairy. They had their arms full as they crept through the garden and let themselves in by the back door.

It may have been a little more than half an hour before Courtot announced that dinner was served. It is only in fairyland that the impossible is accomplished upon the striking of the clock. That, in fact, is the only difference between real-land and fairyland. We are always doing the impossible. We are always building castles—colossal affairs with domes and minarets that stretch up into the infinite blue—but they are built with heart-rending labour, with heart-aching pain, and the clock strikes many and many an hour before their completion, if indeed they are ever completed.

But it was not to be expected that M. le Vicomte, engaged as he was, would be in a mood to worry because the dinner was ten minutes late.

When Courtot came to the door and said, "Dinner is served, M. le Vicomte," he rose and gave his arm to Rozanne as if they were about to attend a palatial repast in which puctuality was taken for granted.

Nevertheless, as they walked towards the parlour, he whispered in her ear, "I have very simple meals, you know, little cousin, you must not expect a banquet."

She looked up into his face and smiled.

"I do, you know," she whispered in return, "I expect everything about you to be very wonderful."

The Vicomte felt his heart sink within him. The day before, his dinner had consisted of a little piece of steak with boiled potatoes. What would it be tonight? He felt that this illusion was essential to his happiness, but how could it be made to last? He had hazarded it all by allowing Rozanne to stay to dinner. He should have waited—waited in any case until his book of poems had brought him in some money; then he could have given a little dinner—ah, such a little dinner! But who would have cooked it? That was another terrible thought. Little as they might be having for dinner now, it was more than likely to be poorly cooked. What would she think of that? In a moment of emotional enthusiasm, he had taken Courtot at his word. Now, how bitterly he regretted his folly.

But what was this? He sat down to the table and stared at a little card in front of him. A *menu!* Five courses! Written in French! What did it mean? There was one also in front of Rozanne. She was looking at it.

When Courtot had gone out of the room she glanced up.

"This is quite a banquet to me," she said. "It is just like you to make everything you have seem nothing. D-did you think I was going to expect ten courses at a moment's notice? If I'd thought you were going to put yourself out in any way I shouldn't have asked to stay. But this is quite a banquet to me."

"Very well"—he bent his head, it hid the wonder in his eyes—"then it is a banquet. That is what we will call it—a banquet."

The first cover was laid before them. The Vicomte tasted it; then, as he raised his head, his eyes sought Courtot's face. It was expressionless.

CHAPTER XV.

THE STRENUOUS SONGS OF TO-DAY.

WE all build our castles. M. le Vicomte had built his. Its foundation stone was that book of verse—those *Songs of Yesterday*—bound already in his imagination in that wonderful cover of parchment, with hand-made pages and silken ribbons.

One morning came and he found his castle in ruins about his feet.

The parcel came back from the publishers to whom he had sent it. They declined—not even regretfully—not even with thanks; but merely—they declined.

For some moments he stood looking at that curt announcement which, with its levelling blow, had shattered his bravest hope. Then Courtot had come into the room. One glance and he had understood. The absolutely motionless figure of his master explained everything. The set pose of his head filled the silence with meaning. The book had been returned.

"You see, Courtot," the Vicomte looked up, "they will have nothing to do with my little book of verse. They will remain Songs of Yesterday. I chose the title well. The Songs of Yesterday can never be quite as stirring as the Songs of To-day, I suppose." With infinite care he folded up the parcel and handed it to Courtot. "Put it away in the long drawer of the chest in my bedroom," he said. "I chose the title too well."

Courtot took the package reverently.

"There are other publishers, M. le Vicomte."

"Of course, of course," the old gentleman nodded. "But I doubt if they could be more explicit, Courtot. Take it away."

When Rozanne came that afternoon, the Vicomte told her.

"You will never see your little book of verse between the parchment covers, Rozanne," he said.

"Oh, why?"

The keen note of disappointment in her voice only added to his own.

He shrugged his shoulders. "The publishers say no—no Songs of Yesterday for us, we want the Songs of To-day. And isn't that what you would prefer too, right in the heart of you? Aren't the Songs of Yesterday just a little bit out of date, just a little bit old-fashioned for you? Wouldn't the strenuous Songs of To-day please you better?"

How could it be expected that she would understand what he meant? She was only a girl. So subtle a wooing as this was beyond her understanding. Had a young man said such words as these, she would have felt the thrill of them in her veins for many days to come. But the Vicomte! This old gentleman with white hair, whose years were written so legibly in his face! It never entered her mind that such a thing were possible. His manners, his chivalry, the things he said, the very way he said them, he was so lovable for all these. She would have told him so without a moment's consideration that she could possibly be misunderstood.

"Wouldn't the strenuous Songs of To-day please you better?"

She took it in its literal sense; saw nothing of the depth of meaning hidden underneath.

"No," she said firmly, "I want your Songs of Yesterday! The strenuous Songs of To-day, as you call them, are too hard, t-too ungentle, if there is such a word. I love that one you wrote for me, that one that begins:

> "'If I could tell the Fate that brings
> The fruit upon the apple tree
> Too late in gentle murmurings
> To woo the blossom on the pear—'"

I love that. They're afraid to write things like that now. They'd call it sentimental."

"And you don't, little cousin?"

"No! Indeed, I don't!"

"Then you prefer my Songs of Yesterday to the strenuous Songs of To-day?"

"You know I do. I simply love them, and I t-think the publishers are—are hateful."

What might not have happened then? He did not understand because he was old; she did not understand because she was so young. What might not have happened then? But at that moment Courtot came out into the garden.

"I beg pardon, M. le Vicomte."

"Well, Courtot?"

"M. Courvoisier is here. He has come down from London especially to see you."

CHAPTER XVI.

MONSIEUR COURVOISIER.

M. COURVOISIER! His notary from Paris! What did it mean? It would have been idle to pretend that his heart did not leap to all the voiceless possibilities of the unexpected. He felt that he was on the threshold of some portentous event. Was he wrong? In another moment, he would be beyond the threshold, and, supposing he found nothing, just the greeting of a good friend, the handshake, the considerate inquiries of one who had not seen him for so long?

He steeled himself to stoicism. His face betrayed nothing; his voice was empty of emotion. Only his heart leapt; that one spasmodic bound of hope which the mellowed side of his nature critically reviewed with all the unemotional wisdom of its sixty years.

"M. Courvoisier," he said quietly. "Oh!" Then he turned easily to Rozanne.

"Will you forgive me, Rozanne? I may not be long, but if you would sooner go—"

"I'll stay," she said eagerly, "please let me stay if you aren't going to be long. We haven't had our tea yet. I couldn't miss that. Let me read the book while you're gone—can I?"

"The *Songs of Yesterday?*"

"Yes."

"Courtot."

"Yes, monsieur."

"In the long drawer of the chest in my room you will find a brown paper parcel. Bring it down to Miss Somerset."

Then he walked into the house. His head was very erect—very stiff, as Octave Bordenelle would have called it. He felt for his snuff-box. It was ready, there in his hand, as he entered the square-roomed hall where M. Courvoisier awaited him. That gentleman stepped forward, hand stretched out, pleasure lighting up every feature in his face. It was plain enough how much this pedantic old nobleman had endeared himself to all those with whom he came in contact. It had been so, even in Torrington Square. It had been so with Rozanne.

"Well, M. Courvoisier, the surprise of this is not great enough to make me forget the pleasure."

Excuse must be found for the Frenchman when emotion rises easily to the throat. It is none the less sincere than the reticent repression of it in this country.

When M. Courvoisier saw this old gentleman whom, when a boy, he had known in the prime of his manhood, whom he had seen in those last days in Paris when everything he possessed was being sold to honourably meet his creditors, whom afterwards he had pictured, living buried in that boarding-house in Torrington Square—when he saw him then, un-

touched, unaltered, except in years—by the stress of circumstance which had fallen upon him, the thought of all he had suffered—suffered too in that dignity of silence which is the greatest suffering of all—rose vividly before him, and it is not to be credited against him that the lump rose in his throat, that the tears burnt in his eyes, or that, without a word, he bent over the Vicomte's hand perhaps a little longer than was necessary.

When he looked up it was with gratitude.

"I suppose," he said with a smile, "there is some fortune or other to be thanked for finding you at home. I have to return to London by the next train, which gives me less than half an hour in your company, and I might easily have missed you."

"Not so easily, my friend, as you think. I go out but little. An hour's walk perhaps every day. That is all. I have a garden to look after here, thanks to M. de Lampriere. And you would scarcely credit what a responsibility a few rose bushes can be. Children are nothing to them." He pulled himself to his full height. The same instinct of pride prompted him that had possessed Courtot in his waiter's clothes in the restaurant in the Tottenham Court Road—just the same instinct as that.

"That is the life we live now, M. Courvoisier," he added finely, "and compared to the old times, the *salons*, the receptions, it is perhaps as well to be so quiet. Even if we could imitate the past it would be child's play, and I am getting too old for that sort of thing."

He touched his fingers lightly on his white hair and smiled.

"That is not the colour for child's play, my friend." He shook his head and smiled again. "Oh, no, one needs golden hair for child's play."

This was so wise of him, so much as it ought to have been; as M. Courvoisier, seeing his white hair and the deep lines of his face, must have expected to find it.

Here there was nothing to be seen of the youth of twenty. Only the subdued mellowness of his sixty years was speaking now. There was no atmosphere of the mirage about M. Courvoisier. He was quite real. In the past he had been a young boy, now he was a full-grown man who knew the responsibilities of life. There was neither thought of deceiving nor deception about him. M. le Vicomte felt the full weight of his sixty years as he stood before him.

So, without thinking, he was himself acting no part, playing with no hallucination. He was just an old man, sixty years of age, who had permitted nothing, not even all the adversity of circumstance, to humble the greatness of his pride.

"Golden hair, my friend," he repeated, "that is the colour for child's play."

He sounded so wise when he said that, so full of the proper spirit towards life. He even deceived his own illusion of youth, cried aloud to himself, "It's a mirage, it's a mirage!" and fancied in that moment that he had ceased to follow its pursuit.

M. Courvoisier nodded his head to such infinite wisdom.

"That is true, M. le Vicomte," he said, "that is true. Golden hair for child's play and golden metal for life. It is for that I came over from Paris last night to see you."

Again the Vicomte's heart leapt. Golden metal! What did he mean by that? There still was wealth, much indeed, to be found in all the branches of his family. That was the thought which had rushed to his mind in the garden when Courtot had mentioned his visitor's name. Golden metal! Golden metal for life! What did he mean by that? His snuff-box was still in his hand. He opened it, and just as he had done once before, he concealed his emotion beneath the show of action. Not until he had put the little gold box back again in his pocket and brushed his handkerchief across his moustache did he reply.

"Life which comes from that crucible, M. Courvoisier," he said quietly then, "it does not interest me. I live comfortably here and existence does not chafe. There is a little chapel just a mile and a half away in the town of Maidlow. It is a quiet walk for me every Sunday. I have my garden to think of, my roses; my apple tree will yield quite a lot of fruit this year. My neighbours are kind and occasionally interesting. A man who has paid his adieux to sixty would be tempting Providence to ask for more. And I never tempt Providence, M. Courvoisier, not now—not now. She is too fickle a maid and wants so much more than you ever promise her."

The notary smiled. It gave him the greatest pleasure in life to say what he was going to say. He looked forward so eagerly, like a child almost, for M le Vicomte's exclamations of delight.

"But this I have to tell you, M. le Vicomte," he said, "is Providence herself and no temptation."

The old gentleman set his lips.

"What is this news?" he asked.

M. Courvoisier cleared his throat.

"I have been notary to your side of the family for many years."

"That is so."

"*Eh, bien!* the Marquis de Pontreuse, your uncle, is—" His hands expressed the approaching calamity. An Englishman would have said at death's door, "He is well over eighty. I was at his bedside but two days ago in reference to some estate and he told me that he had left the bulk of his fortune—in English money some forty thousand pounds—to you."

The Vicomte's hand felt involuntarily for his snuff-box.

"Do you think you heard aright?" he asked with extreme quietness. "M. le Marquis de Pontreuse has little affection for me."

Where were the exclamations of delight? Where were those expressions of surprise he had so childishly

anticipated? Positively, the notary looked his disappointment.

"I could not fail to believe my ears," he said. "But you do not seem pleased, M. le Vicomte. You take it very coldly. You even show no surprise."

"Surprise!" The old gentleman tapped his snuff-box with a trembling finger. "It is a weakness, M. Courvoisier, which the Du Guesclins have never allowed themselves to be mastered by. Besides, why should one be surprised when one does not credit?"

Ah! then there was some show of emotion! M. Courvoisier gesticulated. His hands, his arms, his shoulders, they all said so much more, conveyed his chagrin so infinitely better than the mere tumbling of his words.

"Would I, your notary," he exclaimed, "would I travel from Paris to tell you what is false? I say I heard it with my own ears."

"Then I believe you, M. Courvoisier."

The Vicomte walked to the window and stood looking on to the road, the road that led through Sunningham on its way to the little town of Maidlow.

Forty thousand pounds. How could he believe it, even now? Forty books of poems would not have brought him in so much. Was this the end then, the end of all this struggle to seem other than he was? Would there be no more trembling of the spirit if a visitor proposed they should stay for dinner? Would he be able to go back to Paris, his Paris, Rozanne's Paris—where the *bonnes* play with the children in the Champs Elysées and the fountains in the gardens at Versailles shake out their jewels of water drops in the beating light of the sun?

Did it mean the awakening from this nightmare of poverty, the lifting up of the head from what had seemed a pillow of the stone of bitterness, to the realisation that after all it was the soft down of content?

Did it mean that he would no longer be compelled to strain at his purse to pay the good fellow Courtot

s wages? He had not paid them yet, but he was oing to—of course he was going to. He could not ave brought himself to discharge him for the second me, for the second time to have him know that the xpense of such a luxury was too great.

And lastly, did it mean that Rozanne—Rozanne ho had rather the Songs of Yesterday than those renuous verses of To-day—did it mean that he had ut to ask—that it was now in his power to ask—that ie fruit upon the apple tree had not come too late fter all—that he had but to reach up his hand and luck that white, white blossom of the pear?

Forty thousand pounds!

Was that all it meant? How could it possibly mean iore? and yet, how easily it could mean less.

"Forty thousand pounds," he said aloud.

"'Tis a large sum, M. le Vicomte."

He turned round quietly.

"'Tis a useful sum, M. Courvoisier."

Here, at last, thought the enthusiastic notary, is an dmission. But all the excitability of his nature deanded more. And so keen were its demands that it obbed him of diplomacy.

"Forgive me," he said excitedly, "but I felt overoyed when I heard, because I knew that here in England, though he had come into this small property f M. de Lempriere, you were nevertheless poor. I—"

He stopped. There was an expression upon M. le Vicomte's face which chilled him. The old gentleman vas standing his full height, his head was thrown back.

"I do not know what poverty is, M. Courvoisier," ie said proudly. "Poverty is of the mind, not of the ody. I am not poor. I—I could not be poor." He aid that so grandly. Inches seemed to be added to is stature as he spoke. You knew he must believe very word he uttered when he said it like that. You would almost have believed it yourself. "Had it been ou," he continued, "who had offered me that money, and for that reason, I should have refused it. Poverty"

—he smiled, the moment of resentment had passed— "poverty can only attach itself to poor people. One pities poor people, that is all. May I give you some wine?"

Such pedantry! Such exalted sentiments! And to end it all in that grandiloquent way, "May I give you some wine?" when there was only one bottle left in the house! Ah, he had a noble idea of life, had this old gentleman. His thoughts were big. They were far beyond his means. But what did that matter? Life is short, but it is never short enough for one's means. It is no good expecting it to be.

M. Courvoisier shrank into himself. He had not, when one comes to think of it, so discriminating a mind as Courtot, that excellent fellow of the people. And even Courtot had made his *faux pas* over the eighteen sixpences.

"Thank you, M. le Vicomte," he said in a subdued voice, "I will not take anything, and I—I crave your pardon. I did not mean that you should take what I said—"

"It is granted, monsieur. Please say nothing more. Now tell me more about this money. You say my uncle is very ill?"

"He cannot live, they tell me, more than a month at the utmost." He laid his hand on his heart. "It is so weak that he dare not move."

The Vicomte nodded slowly.

"And he actually told you that the bulk of his fortune would come to me?"

"Those were his words."

"And do you think those words are to be relied upon?"

"Ah, yes, why not? His intellect is as strong as ever it was."

The Vicomte cast his eyes to the window that looked out into the garden.

"But others have a greater right to expect it than I," he said slowly.

"One other, perhaps."

"Yes, one other." He nodded quietly to himself. "Did you know that she lived here with her uncle, only a few hundred yards from this cottage?"

M. Courvoisier made no attempt to conceal his surprise.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he exclaimed, "of course, that is so. I had forgotten it altogether. Tho' I believe I mentioned it in my letter to you when I wrote about this cottage."

"Yes, she lives here," said the Vicomte. "Mademoiselle Rozanne Somerset."

"Exactly. The same. His grandchild. The daughter of your cousin, Rozanne de Pontreuse, who married so foolishly." M. Courvoisier moved uneasily in his chair. Since the Vicomte's outburst against his use of the word poverty, he was not quite certain of himself, and this perhaps was just such another dangerous topic. He shot a swift glance at the old gentleman. "So foolishly," he added, feeling his way. "M. le Marquis never forgave her for that," he continued. "For which reason, I suppose, although you say you are no favourite of his, he is leaving his fortune to you. Yes, she is the other, the daughter of Rozanne de Pontreuse."

"Whom the good God made wonderfully beautiful," said the Vicomte.

M. Courvoisier looked up quickly. Here was a tone in the voice which he did not understand. Evidently there was no resentment to what he had said. None at all. M. le Vicomte was gazing steadily before him, but there was no limitation of horizon in the expression of his eyes. "He looks into the past," thought the notary, but that was not all. M. Courvoisier saw nothing of the mirage which was floating so realistically before the Vicomte's brain. The deep green shadows in that phantom oasis did not exist for him; his ears were deaf to the sound of the cool waters gurgling in the well.

"Beautiful, like her mother?" he said.

"I was speaking of her mother. Rozanne Somerset is her reflection. There is a resemblance that is beautiful in itself."

For a few moments the notary kept silent. One treads lightly when one is walking in the past; the faintest sound, the faintest echo so easily vibrates and shatters illusions as a glass is broken by a single unsympathetic note.

"How long has Rozanne de Pontreuse been dead?" he asked presently.

"Twelve years. She died when this child was eight years old. But I never saw her after that famous ball at the Russian Embassy—you remember it?"

"Ah, yes, of course; but you did not leave Paris then?"

"Oh, no, I left the *salons*, I left the receptions. I might have come in her way."

They paused again. Just that moment of silence to allow the faint vibrations of the present to settle down once more like dust that has been disturbed in a secret chamber.

Then M. Courvoisier began again.

"'Twas strange," he said, "that you should never have met her until after her marriage to Mr. Somerset?"

The Vicomte's shoulders shrugged.

"Not so very strange," he said. "Of course I had seen her as a little girl, just as I saw this child of hers. You must remember, she did not live in Paris then. When first she came to Paris she was a married woman."

"And you never met her till then? I understand. It was your friendship with her after she was married which did much, I fancy, to anger the Marquis de Pontreuse. He would have wished that she bore your name?"

"He would have wished it; yes, the things one wishes for one generally wishes for too late."

"Ah, don't say that, M. le Vicomte, that is too despondent."

"Do you call me despondent, too?"

The Vicomte rose with determination from his chair. "I tell you it is *bourgeois* to be despondent," he said, as though he had been dinning the fact into the notary's ears. "Would you call me *bourgeois?* Can I not make a little truism but what everyone must call me despondent? No, my friend. I look forward—always forward. It is only when one looks behind that one is despondent. But you are right on the other matter. That is how I earned the disapproval of my uncle. Can you wonder then that at first I doubted your story?"

He took a little miniature from the wall, brushed the glass with his handkerchief and handed it to his visitor.

"There she is," he said reminiscently, looking behind him into the past if any man ever did; "the world held many roses for us, M. Courvoisier, but they grew in ploughed fields and her feet were too dainty to cross such ugly ground to pick them."

He looked up to the ceiling then. Everyone does it. Heaven is only a direction, it is not a place.

"Courvoisier, my dear fellow," he said suddenly, "this is the first time I have talked of my affairs for years. Silence is golden, I suppose, a wonderful thing to store in one's secret chambers, but it is not the current coin of speech, and there is always bound to come a day when one feels that one must be lavish with it. This is my day, I suppose. You must forgive me if I seem garrulous."

"Garrulous? How glad do you think I am, M. le Vicomte, to have this opportunity of talking to you? You have so utterly shut yourself away from us."

The old gentleman looked up proudly.

"And don't you think that has been for the best?" he asked. "I could not stay in Paris. Paris is for lovers with light hearts. It is here in England that

one can well nurse one's troubles. The atmosphere suits them and the people are not on the whole inquisitive."

"And so you've kept these matters to yourself?"

"Yes, to myself. The English are a strange people. They have not the understanding. They love, but it is a solemn ceremony, and then the majority of them marry their lovers, which is more solemn still. But if by chance a woman does tire of her husband—and it is not unheard of, my friend—she wears her life out in hiding it and the fact that she has an *amant*, and that is the most solemn ceremony of them all. Married men and married women have their lovers here in this country, oh, yes! but they are ashamed of them in their hearts, which seems a strange principle, for if they are ashamed, it must be a poor passion, so little worth its while."

The notary shook his head sententiously. He declared it to be a weak-kneed morality.

"Perhaps it is better than none at all," said the Vicomte. "Well, so you see," he went on, "I am but little more than a cloistered monk. If it were not for this child of Rozanne de Pontreuse, who comes here every day to see me, I should be alone, quite alone, except for that good fellow, Courtot."

"What is this girl's name?"

"I told you. Just as her every feature is the same as her mother's, so is her name. On the very day that I came here, she paid me her first visit. And I assure you that when I saw her—framed in that doorway there—I thought that Fate was playing with my senses."

"What did you do?"

"Do, M. Courvoisier? What does a gentleman do when a lady pays him a visit? Do you think there is a moment under the sun when a gentleman can forget what he should do? And when she spoke—"

"Her voice as well?"

"Ah, my dear Courvoisier, one hears at times one's

own echo and laughs at its grotesqueness. An echo! The word does not approach its description. She *was* Rozanne de Pontreuse come back to life again to add a gesture to our last conversation."

"And how old is she?"

Ah, what a pair of romantic garrulous old men! And not so very old after all. M. Courvoisier was only just looking at his fiftieth year. As yet he had not recognised it.

"How old is she?" he repeated.

"How old?" echoed the Vicomte. "What *is* age? Ah, tell me that! The accumulation of life's troubles. And we call them years. The greatest trouble of her life is that she cannot sit of a morning in the Champs Elysées and listen to the *bonnes*, in their white caps and streamers, playing with the children under the trees. That is her age."

He turned to the window, looked out again on to the road. The farm waggons trundled by, coming back from the fields. The men walked contentedly at the horses' heads, those huge, strong, massive horses with their shaggy fetlocks and their ragged manes. He watched the little streams of dust that were lifted on the wheels' rims and under the shuffling hoofs of those patient, ambling beasts, watched them as they circled away in little eddies of smoke and filtered through the already whitened hedgerows.

For a moment the eyes of the notary followed him in a comprehensive glance. Then, as if it were too sacred —just as one hesitates to watch the moving lips of a woman in prayer—he turned the other way, looked out of the other window into the garden.

He saw the apple tree. He saw the figure seated beneath it, turning over the leaves of paper on her lap. Suddenly, she looked up at some little sound, some little noise in the branches above her head, and M. Courvoisier caught his breath.

Had his glance been comprehensive, his knowledge now was complete. A moment longer he gazed, then

turned before the old gentleman should have seen him.

As if that movement had broken the spell M. le Vicomte turned as well.

"And now let us finish romancing, M. Courvoisier," he said with a level tone. "Let us finish romancing with a material question. Are you *sure*"—his voice dropped to seriousness—"that M. le Marquis de Pontreuse told you I should be the recipient of his fortune?"

He crossed the room again and looked steadily into the notary's eyes.

"As certain, M. le Vicomte," was the answer, "as that your material question, so far from ending romance, begins it."

Their eyes met in silence, just at that moment when the thinness of a thread will suspend the weightiest of meanings. One moment! If you do not catch it then the thread snaps and you have lost touch with the infinite.

The Vicomte pulled out his snuff-box, his fingers felt instinctively for the catch upon the lid.

"And how long will it be, M. Courvoisier," he asked reverently, "before the formalities attending my uncle's death will be got through?"

"Six months, M. le Vicomte. Nothing less."

"Ah, I see, you men of the law, you pay yourselves with time—is it not so?"

The notary laughed.

"Time certainly is our perquisite, M. le Vicomte." His eyes fell on the gold snuff-box. He touched it with his fingers. "That is charming," he said; "is it old?"

"If troubles are years, M. Courvoisier, it is. That was given to my grandfather by Louis XVI. Upstairs, under lock and key, I have a ring, it belonged to Marie Antoinette. It is set about a little braid of her hair. This snuff-box, you see, bears the *fleur-de-lys* and his name in diamonds."

The notary handled it reverently.

"But these are worth, ah, they are worth—"

"Their weight in the history of France, my friend. And now tell me—it is some years since we met—would you think to look at me that I have grown very—old?"

M. Courvoisier smiled. His thoughts were speeding through that window at his back to the figure of a girl seated beneath the apple tree.

"No older than your question, M. le Vicomte," he said. "But now I must be going. I shall let you hear from me from time to time. I shall, of course, let you know the moment when—when it is all over. And directly the will is read, of course if you should want any money you have only to let us know."

"Quite so, I understand. And in the meantime, supposing I were to find myself in any little temporary embarrassment?"

"We shall be willing to lend you the money, M. le Vicomte."

The old gentleman shook his head emphatically.

"Ah, no, no, not that. I do not borrow, my friend. It is the politest form of theft, and politeness is not everything."

The notary's hand shot out in gentle deprecation.

"Then I can only suggest, M. le Vicomte, that you realise some money upon those treasures that you have. They would fetch a wonderful price."

The Vicomte looked at him amazed.

"I would sooner part with my life, M. Courvoisier," he replied.

"Oh, I merely meant that you could get a large amount advanced upon such valuable objects, M. le Vicomte. That was all. I assure you that was all. Forgive me if I hurry now. The time is impatient with me. Good-bye."

They shook hands. The Vicomte opened the door, and with another handshake the notary walked down the little path to the wicket gate.

"Good-bye," he called out again, "good-bye."

"Good-bye," said the old gentleman. Then he turned into the house.

"Sell them," he muttered, "sell them! *Bourgeois! Bourgeois!* Tch-tch-tch-tch-tch."

And his head was still nodding reprovingly at the thought as he walked back through the garden to Rozanne.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE APPLE TREE—SUNNINGHAM

SHE did not hear his approach and for one moment he stopped and watched her.

Forty thousand pounds. How long would it take before he could actually believe it to be true? What kind of process must his mind pass through before it would positively accept it without question?

"Little cousin," he said.

She looked up.

"Put the book away. The Songs of Yesterday have all been sung. It's To-day now. Let me wrap it up again and send it back to the long drawer in the chest in my room."

"Do you mean it will never be published?" she asked ruefully.

"Would you wish it to be?"

"*My* book of poems? Why, of course I should!"

"Then it shall be, one day. I'll pay for it." He took the parcel from her. "Are we going to have tea now? I haven't kept you too long, have I?"

"Oh, no, I'd forgotten tea. Let me call Courtot." He stood and watched her as she ran down the garden, and when she called "Courtot, Courtot, can we have tea?" the sound of that name in her voice, just as he had often heard her mother use it, was too finishing a touch to the phantom mirage in his mind.

They might cry their warning to him a thousand times, but he must go on now. He saw, he believed, he knew his heart had gone out. He must pursue it now until the end.

"I want you to do me a favour," she said as she came back to the apple tree. "I want you to give me some advice. Don't say a word until I've t-told you everything."

That little stammer was fascinating. The inclination to remind her of it whenever she spoke was tantalising on his lips.

"Go on," he said. Perhaps if he drew her attention to it she would try to check herself. That would be too great a pity.

"Well, now, listen. You've heard of Mr. Brabazon, the rich, vulgar man who lives up at Thurnham House?"

"The *nouveau riche?* Oh, yes."

"Well, some time ago he advised Uncle Wilfrid to buy shares in a mine—some sort of a mine, a gold mine I suppose—and Uncle Wilfrid had not got the money. So Mr. Brabazon lent it."

"And your uncle told you nothing about it?"

"No, he never said a word."

"And the mine was a failure?"

"Yes. How d-did you know?"

"That is just the way things happen, Rozanne. Mines, shares, investments, books of poems, all these things are argosies; we count upon them, and we count and we count, but they ride the seas just behind the horizon and we never see them. It is only the impossible—a wonderful ship she is too—that comes sailing into the harbour out of the sun one fine morning while we are sitting at the end of the jetty, our eyes closed, fast asleep, tired out with watching for our expected argosy. That is the way life goes. And I said I wouldn't interrupt. I've been giving my advice too soon. That's the way with old men."

"You're not old. I won't let you call yourself old.

Why, Uncle Wilfrid's two years younger than you, but he always seems ages older."

How pleasant that was to hear. So pleasant that he could afford to doubt it in order that she might be induced to add another proof.

Ah, but he is very energetic. I see him sometimes going out in the morning with his butterfly net just like a schoolboy. And my little walk every day is a very funereal affair."

"Well, perhaps it is, but—"

"Oh, I only suggested it was."

"Well, then, it isn't, of course you know it isn't. But you must listen. Here comes tea, now listen. I'm giving a party next week, a sort of garden-party, in honour of Mr. Dalziel, a gentleman who is coming to stay with us, and I want to know if you think I ought to ask Mr. Brabazon, seeing that we are still in his debt. Do you th-think I ought?"

He waited until Courtot had laid the things before her. He waited, drumming with his fingers upon the garden table, until Courtot had departed again into the kitchen. Then he delivered judgment—such wise judgment. No wonder this child of a girl looked up to him, thought him the most wonderful person in the world. He could be so wise at times.

"If it were a hundred and thirty years ago," he said, "I should say advice were superfluous. Mr. Brabazon would not dare to come, even if he were asked. He would realise that no claim upon his host could ever make him feel at ease. But that is not what happens now. Money is the freedom into the holiest of holies; there is no lock but for which it can mould a key. I am sorry, little cousin, sorry for your sake, but that is true. Everything is moulded, stamped and minted now, even a gentleman. It would be wiser for you to ask him. But I will be there. I will help."

"You will? Oh, will you really?" She stretched out both her hands and took his. "I don't mind in the least then—in fact it'll be rather fun then."

She threw back her head and laughed—laughed as her eyes threaded their way through the tangled branches of the apple tree to the paling sky above. Then she felt his lips touch her hand. The laugh checked on her tongue and she looked down. His head was still bent over her hand.

"Why do you do that?" she asked. All the laughter was gone. She did not know why, but in that moment, the evening seemed to have grown colder. She felt the chill of it in her blood.

He let her hands fall.

"You object?"

"No, no." She was afraid she had hurt him. "Why should I?" Out went the hands once more. "You may do it again."

He kissed them again, more lingeringly, more gallantly than before.

And then she repeated:

"Why do you do that? Used you to kiss my mother's hands like that?"

That was her instinct, the romantic instinct of the schoolgirl, the woman scarce awake. She did not take it for herself. The romance was not hers. She never believed it was hers; but in the dim uncertainty of her mind it foreshadowed it. One day someone would kiss her like that. One day—she thrilled to the thought of it.

"Used you?" she asked once more when he looked up in silence.

"Yes, oh, yes, I have kissed her hands many times—many times."

"Then why did you never marry her?"

It seemed such a logical question to her. She never quite understood why he smiled, and because he smiled so sadly, she never dared ask him the reason of it. Perhaps she had said something foolish; the very thought of it prompted her to repeat the question.

"Why?" she asked. "Tell me why you never married her."

"If I could tell the Fate that brings
The fruit upon the apple tree
Too late in gentle murmurings
To woo the blossom on the pear—"

There was still the same smile in his eyes as he quoted it.

She shook her finger at him.

"Ah, you did not write that for me. Now I know who you wrote it for."

"Do you think you really do know?" he asked. "Do you think you really do? Give me your hands again."

She held them out to him, and for the third time he pressed them to his lips.

And as Courtot came out into the garden to clear away, he saw, but his face was expressionless. Even his lips did not twitch when he found that the tea had not been touched at all. For an instant he looked at his master, thinking, should he draw their attention to the fact.

It was more tactful not to.

He bore the tray away in silence while Rozanne and the Vicomte looked solemnly after him. Then, with a twinkle in her eyes, she leant across the table.

"Did you realise that we never touched the tea," she said, "and it's getting on for seven o'clock?"

"Never took our tea?" He sat upright.

"No, never touched it."

The old gentleman looked after Courtot's retreating figure as though he would call him back, but in the bend of those shoulders he seemed to read—understanding.

He leant back in his chair and said nothing.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW TO CALL M. LE VICOMTE.

WHEN a man is in love certain wits about him are sharpened. He becomes more observant of those moments which are advantageous, more cunning in snatching them from the hand of Circumstance before they actually slip away.

Courtot's wooing of Mrs. Bulpitt may have had all the appearance of a very material affair. To marry a woman because she is a good cook must surely seem the essence of that spirit which predominates in the *mariage de convenance.* And no doubt it is perfectly true that that was the spirit in which it began.

You do not open the door to a lady who applies to your master for a situation and fall in love with her because you have to turn her away. Oh, certainly, you do not do that. You may feel sorry for her. But that is another matter.

And when your cunning prompts you to acquire her services all the same, saving your master the expense of her wages by marrying her yourself, why, you do not even love her then.

No. Love, let us hope it at least, is a nobler sentiment than that.

But if when, in the process of this very materialistic wooing, you find that the good woman has a heart above all the culinary craft in the world, and that you —of your own engaging personality—have touched it; when you find her rough, worn hand, just trembling under yours, her eyes lit with that illumination of romance which is unmistakable, just because your own eyes have looked into them, you are well apt to forget all your unselfish purposes, you are quite likely indeed to realise, not only that you yourself must be a fine fellow, but that she has qualities of gentleness, of

goodness and of lovableness which you had never dreamed of.

All this—nothing more or less than this—had happened to Courtot.

He was in love.

When Mrs. Bulpitt, without question, except as to what was the meaning of *ma cherie*, without hesitation and without complaint, has assisted him so willingly in saving the Vicomte from that *impasse* into which Rozanne's self-imposed invitation had placed him, Courtot had been won to unstinted homage and devotion.

Then he was in love. Then his wits were sharpened. He had seen the old gentleman kissing Rozanne's fingers in the garden that evening, had realised the advantage it gave him and snatched it greedily from the hand of Circumstance without delay.

As he served the coffee that evening after dinner to M. le Vicomte, he made so bold as to say that the date for his wedding could now be fixed if M. le Vicomte would permit.

The old gentleman looked up with an indulgent smile. When we are in love ourselves, we are always indulgent to others in the same predicament. It is so much more than probable that they are never as deeply moved as ourselves; so likely that their feelings are not as serious—not as intense. But they love and we feel sympathy for them. On that score we are ready to grant them anything. Courtot was quite aware of that. And had he not seen M. le Vicomte kissing Rosanne's fingers under the apple tree?

"So the lady has given her consent, Courtot?"

"Yes, M. le Vicomte."

"And of course you are very happy?"

"Yes, M. le Vicomte. She is good—it may not be that she is beautiful—but she is very good. I did not know in England that a woman could be so good as Mrs. Bulpitt."

The old gentleman looked up with a frown. He was

in love. It must not be forgotten that he was in love.

"The world is full of good women, Courtot," he said, "but it needs a man who is good himself to find them. If you have found a good woman, Courtot, you are a good man. There is some truth in that, believe me. Well, then"—he folded his serviette with infinite care and laid it on the table beside his empty cup—"when am I to see this Mrs. Bulpitt? I told you I should like to see her before I decided whether there—whether there would be room for her in the cottage."

"You may see her, M. le Vicomte," said Courtot, "at any moment that you please."

"Now, could I see her now?"

"Oh, yes, monsieur."

"Then why not now? She lives in the village, you said?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Then go and fetch her now—I'll see her now. Tell her, Courtot, tell her that—that—ah! yes—tell her that I am accustomed to men-servants in my house and that—that—I only just want to see if she is quiet and agreeable before I—you understand—you'll know better how to talk to her than I shall, but give her some reason, some reason, but I must see her. It's a responsibility, you know, Courtot—this marrying—it's quite a responsibility, and if she's to live in the cottage here—well, you see, I shall have to share it. But I shall be lenient, you can rely upon my being lenient."

When Mrs. Bulpitt was told of the impending interview her mouth opened, her eys dilated.

"Oh, I can't!" she exclaimed. "How can I? Why, look at me!"

Courtot did look at her, then he kissed her.

"It is quite good," he said, "you will do splendid. I have told M. le Vicomte you are not beautiful. 'She is good,' I tell him. 'I did not know,' I tell him, 'I did not know in England there could be so good a woman as Mrs. Bulpitt.' And he say to me, 'The

world is full of good women, Courtot.' Ah, he is wonderful, the things he say. *Allez! Allez!* Put on your hat."

"It's no good, my dear"—the poor woman sank into the nearest chair overcome in her bewilderment—"I can't come like this. You aren't going to persuade me that a gentleman like him is likely to believe I'm a good woman with the state I'm in. Why, I'm a sight, that's what I am. If I can't go and take the dirt off my face and put on a clean apron, well, I won't come at all. We'll call off the banns to-morrow morning and I'll go on Mrs. Bupitt for the rest of my days."

Courtot gazed at her in despair. He pictured M. le Vicomte waiting, patiently drumming with his fingers on the table.

Oh, these women! Will they never realise that virtue is the greatest beauty they possess? The thought spread across his mind in his own language. He found quite a lot of wisdom in it. That all men think like that of a woman once they love her did not occur to him. Quite fondly he imagined it to be original. He tried to frame it into English for her benefit. It would not go.

"Very well, very well," he exclaimed disconsolately, "go and wash, put on your clean apron—*le bon Dieu tu benisse*—I love your dirty face—*allez!*"

She did more than wash her face. She did more than put on a clean apron. She absolutely changed her dress! When after a few moments and impatience had got the better of him, Courtot called out that he was going, she cried back in reply:

"You can't come in! You can't come in!"

Oh, these women! That is the worst of them! They know exactly what a man means when he talks like that. He calls out, "I am going, I am going!" And they call back, "You can't come in, you can't come in!" It is very simple, it is very charming. But that is the worst of them.

And when she did make her appearance in the wonderful black frock and the black cape—the lean aigrette nodding perkily on the top of her black bonnet—the only retaliation left to Courtot was the retaliation that he took.

"I thought so!" he exclaimed. "I guessed it!"

While really it had never entered his head at all.

Then they walked up to the cottage together, and once in the darkness, her hand felt out nervously for his arm.

"He won't be very—very strict, will he?" she whispered. "And oh, goodness! I forgot. What do I call him? How do you call him?"

"M. le Vicomte."

He said it in his most French of French accents. Just to tease her, only to tease her. We tease the women we love, we can't help it. They seem such children. And when the word "we" is used it means men. Men are such superior beings!

"Say it again," she asked nervously.

"M. le Vicomte."

He repeated it in precisely the same tone of voice. She looked up into his face. It was absolutely solemn.

"It's no good," she whispered. "I couldn't do it."

Then he laughed at her, put his arm round her shoulders and pulled her to him, kissing her cheek.

"Oh, don't," she said, "somebody'll see."

There was nobody within sight upon the road.

"*Eh, bien!*" he said, taking away his arm. "You are ashamed. I love you and you are ashamed. Very well. *Mon Dieu! Quel pays!*" His gesture conveyed the utmost depths of despair. Then he stopped still in the middle of the road.

"Mrs. Bulpitt," he said firmly, "kiss me! If you do not kiss me here, now, you will have put on that bonnet and that cape and that frock all for nothing. No! Do not look to see if anyone is coming. Kiss me!"

There was really nothing for it but to obey. French-

men had very peculiar ideas about things. She was not quite certain whether she disliked those ideas or not; but it was quite impossible to think that she should have put on her best dress for nothing, so she kissed, there in the middle of the road, praying in the heart of her that none of the chapel people were looking out of their windows.

"Now," he said, I will tell you how to call M. le Vicomte."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE INSPECTION.

WHEN the door into the square hall opened, M. le Vicomte was in the midst of writing a poem. He always strove to express in verse those moments in his life which stood apart, and this—this day when M. Courvoisier had thrown open for him the gate into a garden, luxuriant with the flowers of glorious possibility, was such a moment when all his emotions, all surprise, all delight, concentrated themselves into those fragile inadequate, useless little poems he had so aptly called *Songs of Yesterday*.

"There shall be no more sighing of the wind,
No longer breezes whisper in the wheat
With an arm as lithe
As the reaper's scythe
Fate scatters all her harvest at my feet."

He had got as far as this, the end of the first verse. But he was not quite satisfied with that first line. Why, for instance, should there be no more sighing of the wind? Sighing—oh, yes! Sighing, certainly! That there should be no more of it all harmonised with that undeviating principle of his life that it was *bourgeois* to be despondent. But why of the wind?

Could he justify it? No. Would it be likely that after the harvest was cut the winds of heaven would alter their courses for one single moment? Most certainly it would not. Yet it sounded well. "There shall be no more sighing of the wind." He could not help liking it, just as a line, that was all, only as a line.

"There shall be no more sighing of the wind
No longer breezes whisper in the wheat."

Oh, it must do. He let it pass. Then the door opened—following a timid knock which he had been too engrossed to notice—and admitted Mrs. Bulpitt.

When he turned round she bobbed and said, "Good-evening, sir," regardless of all the rehearsals which Courtot had given her.

"Good-evening, Mrs. Bulpitt," he said amiably; and to himself he added, "A most respectable-looking woman, my good Courtot. But why marry her?"

"I understand," he continued aloud, "from Courtot, my servant, that you and he wish to be married."

"Yes, sir"—she bobbed again—"he's asked me, that is, and I'm agreeable."

"Ah, well, I—I hope you'll be very happy." He smiled at her, and oh! he could smile so charmingly. She wreathed into smiles herself and pulled, bashfully, at a loosened stitch in her black glove. Maybe it is difficult to imagine it quite fascinating to see the foolish embarrassment of a woman of forty-nine who is in love, but it is quite fascinating—quite. "But, let me see," he continued, "oh, yes, I'm—I'm only accustomed to men-servants, you know, Mrs. Bulpitt."

She nodded her head.

"So he told me, sir, so he told me when he first came to see me."

When he first came to see her? What did that mean? He had only told Courtot to say that to her this evening. However——

"Well, I understand," he went on, "that Courtot wishes to bring you here to the cottage. Of course, so long as he is in my service, he must live here. And this is a small place, Mrs. Bulpitt; oh, it is wee —tiny. So I told Courtot that I must see you first before I gave him permission. I am sure you understand. It is only that I should not like to have anyone in this cottage who would—would"—he tried so hard not to hurt her feelings—"make it uncomfortable for me. But of course," he added quickly, very quickly, "now that I have seen you, I find you quiet, respectable, honest, everything that I could wish." How could one be dishonest with such a trusting nature as this? He had only seen her for five minutes. "And I am sure that Courtot is a very happy man."

Of course, she loved him then. They all loved him. He did everything so beautifully. His dignity was never lessened however friendly his conversation might be.

"I don't think you'll have anything to complain of in me, sir," she said, "and I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you. I know I shall be very happy here." She kept back her natural inclination to tears, knowing how much gentlemen objected to them.

"Oh, I think you will be happy," he said. "Courtot is a good fellow, the best in the world. And I assure you I should not willingly let him marry unless he had found a good woman like yourself who was worthy of him."

This was all very harassing. She did her best not to cry. Her eyes blinked and she sniffed a little. These French people had an uncomfortable way of touching one's heart. She did not really want to cry; but she felt perilously near it. An Englishman in the same situation would have just looked her up and down and passed her, as they judged the horses in the cattle fair at Maidlow. But these Frenchmen!

Well, look at the way Courtot had wooed her! She began to think it a characteristic of the country. No wonder, with two such palpable examples before her very eyes.

"I'm sure I hope I'll come up to your expectations, m-m-mossier." She gave it up! She was too agitated then to remember all the different inflections in Courtot's voice when he had rehearsed her out in the garden. "And of course if there's anything I can do about the house, sir, I shall be only too plased. I think I may say I can cook. I had superintendence of the kitchen for three years up at Thurnham House there—Mr. Brabazon's place—while my late husband was butler; when he died they got a man to do the cooking, a foreign I think he is. But I fancy I may say I can cook."

Now she was taking advantage of him. If she was going to interfere to any extent in the management of his household, he must nip it in the bud.

"I don't think I shall expect you to do anything like that, Mrs. Bulpitt," he said quickly. "Courtot can cook very well indeed when he likes. I had someone to dine with me the other evening and he served me as nice a little dinner as I could want. Oh, he can cook very well when he likes."

Was ever a woman placed under such a stress of temptation as this? It was hard, it was very bitter. It is so naturally human to grudge the praise given to another, which by every right—except that of loyalty—one might claim for oneself. Praise, after all, is the only payment in this world. The minted metal, clinking in the hand, is nothing to it. Still, though they who work in the glare of the footlights, eager to skim the sudden surface of applause though they may be in the public eye, yet he who works by the light of one tallow candle is in the eye of God.

She wanted the glare of the footlights. In that moment she craved for the surface of applause, did

that estimable Mrs. Bulpitt. But loyalty won out. She chose the obscure light of the tallow candle. She kept her own counsel. This is heroism.

"I didn't say that, sir, meaning as I should want to interfere," she explained. "I was only telling you that I had been cook up at Thurnham House—in fact, of course, sir, as you know, it was through applying here for the situation of cook that I came to meet Courtot."

She saw no harm in saying that. There was no disloyalty in insisting that however good in the craft he might believe Courtot to be, still, she knew her work. It was not incumbent upon her to absolutely plead incompetence.

"You came here to apply for the situation of cook?" repeated the Vicomte. Slowly the truth was beginning to reach him. "A most respectable-looking woman, my good Courtot, but why marry her?" He remembered that thought crossing his mind when first she had entered the room. Was this why? Was this why?

"Yes, sir, Courtot said he'd speak to you about it."

"Well, well!"

"And then he came to me a few days later and said as how you didn't like women servants about the place. That was the way it all began, sir."

"You fell in love then?"

"Well, sir, I can't say as I did, straight from the first. It hadn't entered my head. It wasn't till he said about my being lonely that the thought of it first came to me."

"I see, oh, I see, Mrs. Bulpitt. You mean the fancy found him first?"

"Well, it's generally in that way, isn't it, sir? The man's eye falls on the woman first, as you might say. I know I shouldn't have thought of marrying Mr. Bulpitt if he hadn't, in a manner of speaking, begun it."

"Yes, I quite understand." He rose to his feet intimating that the interview was at an end. "Well, thank you, Mrs. Bulpitt, for this—this little conversation. I shall be obliged if, when you go out, you would tell Courtot that I want to speak to him. Thank you, good-evening—good-evening."

As the door closed, he turned on his heel, took his snuff-box from his pocket, pinched the powder vehemently between his fingers, and shook it underneath his nose as he walked excitedly across the room.

"The rascal," he muttered to himself; "the unpardonable villainy of it!"

Oh, he was incensed! The eighteen sixpences were nothing to this! To decoy this unsuspecting woman into marrying him because she was a capable cook! *Mon Dieu!* His blood boiled.

Then Courtot entered, imperturbable, serene.

"Yes, M. le Vicomte."

"Courtot." He turned on him. His anger in the restaurant in the Tottenham Court Road had been nothing to this, a mere ruffling breeze. This was a hurricane. The sense of chivalry in him had been outraged. To treat a woman like this—no matter what her station—it was unpardonable! "Courtot, are you going to marry this Mrs. Bulpitt?"

"I wish to do so, M. le Vicomte," he replied humbly. "If you will permit it."

"You wish to do so?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Why?"

Courtot looked steadily at his master. What had happened? What had she told him? Had she told him that she had cooked the dinner the other evening? No! Whatever had occurred, he believed more in the goodness of Mrs. Bulpitt than to think that. Then what had taken place?

"Why?" repeated the Vicomte. "Answer me."

"I have told you, M. le Vicomte," he replied simply. "She is good—she may not be beautiful, but she is good. I love her."

Now what could the old gentleman say to that? It was direct, it was simple. As Courtot made the statement, you could not have believed but that it came from the heart. There is no disguising of the fact when the heart is in the voice, unless your own heart be very ill-acquainted with such matters. The Vicomte looked up at him, wavering in his mind, completely undecided now. It was a very serious accusation he was about to make. He hesitated considerably. It was an extremely serious accusation.

"Then is it true," he asked, avoiding the direct denunciation, "that Mrs. Bulpitt first came here to inquire for a situation as cook?"

"Oh! this was what she had said. How simply one's most cunning intentions could come to light.

"Yes, M. le Vicomte, that is true."

"And you sent her away? You said that you would speak to me about it?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Then, having asked my permission to be allowed to marry, when you had only seen her that once, you go back and tell her that I am only accustomed to men-servants in my house and therefore cannot employ her services. Is all this so."

"Yes, M. le Vicomte, it is so."

"Then again I ask you"—he curbed himself so strenuously, lest he should bring down his hand upon the table with the question, and that would be so undignified—"why do you wish to marry this excellent woman?"

"Because, M. le Vicomte," he replied, "I love her."

Well, of course, the Vicomte was utterly disarmed by such simplicity as this. But it irritated him; it annoyed him.

"Do you mean to say," he exclaimed, "that you

can be so readily susceptible to a grand passion that you fall in love when—when you have just seen—oh!—it is preposterous, Courtot! It is preposterous! You are deceiving this good woman. Tell me now, tell me honestly, did you cook that dinner the other evening when Mademoiselle Rozanne stayed to keep me company?"

"No, M. le Vicomte."

"Ah, I knew it! I knew it!" He rose excitedly to his feet, walked across the room to the window and back again. "Mrs. Bulpitt cooked it? Is it not so?"

"Yes, monsieur."

Ah, such villainy, such villainy! But he had exposed it.

"And now tell me," he said quietly, "what it was that made you wish to marry Mrs. Bulpitt?"

There was no help for it now. The position was inevitable, just as inevitable as it had been when M. le Vicomte discovered the sixpences in the lining of his overcoat pocket. Courtot took a deep breath.

"Will you please, if I may explain," he said, gathering time.

"Unless you can explain to my satisfaction, Courtot, I shall consider it my duty to tell this good woman exactly the value of your sentiments. Go on, I am listening."

"Well, M. le Vicomte, it was like this." Whenever Courtot was about to use the ingenuity of his wits, building a story upon a scaffolding of truth, he began with this particular phrase, "It was" or "It is like this." It helped him to visualise the whole structure he was about to create. "It was like this, M. le Vicomte. Mrs. Bulpitt she came to the door one morning while you were at breakfast. 'Does he want a cook?' she say. I shake my head. I did not think, M. le Vicomte, that it was so. I send her away and say I will speak to you. But I know, M. le Vicomte, oh, yes, I know that you did

not want a cook. She would be too expensive. So I say to myself, 'No, oh, no'; but I did not want to hurt her feelings, so I say, 'I will tell M. le Vicomte,' and I send her away. Then, monsieur, when I see you do not eat the fish what I had cooked for your breakfast, I taste it, and then I know. 'I cannot cook,' I say to myself, 'it is no good, but I cannot, and M. le Vicomte, he will not feed properly if his food is not cooked.' So then I think, monsieur—Mrs. Bulpitt—as a cook she would be expensive, but as my wife, oh, no! oh, no! So I come and ask your permission. Then I go and see the good woman herself. So much, monsieur, I admit, I deceive her. It is the *mariage de convenance.* But see what happens! We become friends. She is so good, it may not be that she is beautiful, but she is so good, and I, ah! M. le Vicomte, if you can know the love that comes to a man's heart when he kisses the hand of a good woman you will understand. Now, M. le Vicomte, it might be that she could not make the simplest cup of coffee and I would still ask to make her my wife."

Of course, there was nothing more to be said. Imbue a Frenchman with the spirit of Romance and he will forgive anything. Besides, Courtot had chosen that phrase of his so happily, there was so much of the genuine air of simplicity about it, "If you know the love that comes to a man's heart when he kisses the hand of a good woman." Had not the old gentleman realised it himself only that very afternoon? Oh, certainly, it was well chosen. It absolutely clinched the matter. The Vicomte held out his hand.

"I have misjudged you, Courtot," he said. "That is often the way in this world. There is always something better below the surface of things than any of us are ever aware of. Mrs. Bulpitt shall live here, oh, yes, certainly she shall live here. She shall cook me little dinners as she did the other

night; but she shall be in my service, Courtot, not in yours, not in yours. We have passed the days when a man's wife is his servant."

CHAPTER XX.

ARTHUR DALZIEL.

ONE grows old as much from habit as anything else. There is nothing like a groove, nothing like a deep-rooted custom to atrophy the mind, to waste it away into old age before its time. The man who takes his hour's sleep every afternoon and comes to need it from habit may be preserving his health, but he is in a fair way towards becoming a prey to senility. That is so. One might think health has a lot to do with youth. It is a mistake. There was scarcely a healthier man in the whole of Buckinghamshire than Wilfrid Somerset, but habits and grooves and invariable customs had made him an old man at fifty-four. Typically, he was an Englishman, and that accounts for a great deal of it. As a nation we are the slaves of custom, whilst middle age and senility are our most noticeable characteristics.

Rozanne had made a comparison. The odiousness of such things render them none the less inevitable. She had even remarked to M. le Vicomte that though her uncle was some years his junior, he yet seemed much the older of the two. The truth of it was undeniable; the reason obvious. He no longer lived. You cannot call it life when even existence itself comes to be a matter not of your own choice but merely an obedience to the habits which have fastened themselves upon you.

There is an old man of the sea, waiting somewhere for every one of us, and habits are the fingers by which he clings to our unwilling shoulders. When once his claws are firmly embedded, when once we

come to need a thing, not because we want it but because we cannot do without it, then—though such honesty be hard to find—we may fairly admit to ourselves that we are old, we may reconcile ourselves to the fact that it is impossible to shake off this old man of the sea, that then his burden must be borne as well as our own until the end.

The first glass of port that makes its appeal of necessity after a meal is the first insidious whispered persuasion of that very legendary yet very real old man of the fairy tale.

Upon the shoulders of Mr. Somerset at the Red House in Sunningham, he had fastened his gripping fingers, and at fifty-four, Rozanne's uncle had become old in mind, wanting in initiative, a man who just keeps himself alive by the pursuit of those hobbies to which he has grown accustomed.

Is it then to be wondered at that the youth of Rozanne should have found no company with such a nature? His bees and his beetles, his butterflies and his moths, they were interesting—what tiniest insect in the whole of creation is not?—but pinned to a setting board, or watched through the glass windows of the latest-patterned hive, they lost all charm to her.

In youth it is the freedom of life that appeals—the liberty to live. When that has lost its fascination youth goes with it—a flame rushing heavenwards, leaving cold ashes. Nothing but a great emotion will ever draw it back again.

But despite all this soporific atmosphere—as deadening as the odour that oozed so heavily from his killing bottles—with which Mr. Somerset had surrounded Rozanne ever since she had left the convent in France and come to live under his protection, he had not succeeded in robbing her of the spirit of youth. She was too young for that. And when M. le Vicomte had taken up his abode in the cottage and she had

gone regularly every afternoon to see him, the dreary evenings at the Red House, when wooden squares were being made for the bees in which to secrete their honey, or new labels were being gummed under the endless rows of inanimate insects, had no longer any power to depress her.

Then came Arthur Dalziel, the visitor whose advent she had mentioned to the Vicomte under the apple tree in the garden.

He arrived one afternoon. The same old vehicle which had brought the Vicomte from the station that first day of his arrival, conveyed him also from the train. Its heavy, lumbering movements, the torn and faded leather of its cushions, produced a very different effect upon him from what it had done upon M. le Vicomte. He chafed under the lethargy of its progress. At twenty-four the world and all that is in it goes much too slowly.

"Can't you get that horse of yours to move on a bit quicker?" he called out once during the drive.

The coachman practically pulled up the animal to a standstill and looked round in amazement. Go faster? But what for? The young gentleman was not going to the station; he was coming from it. There *were* times in the placidity of their existence when the old white horse had to put his best foot foremost to catch a train; but even that was very seldom. He never let it run as close as that if he could help it. But coming *from* the station!

"Are yer in an 'urry, sir?" he asked.

"No, I'm not in a hurry, but I don't want to take all night."

He tried to put some feeling into the statement, but an irresistible sense of humour made him laugh at the end of it. The coachman laughed too. The young gentleman was only joking. It was only his fun. They were going along quite fast enough. Why, they had passed Banks, the butcher's cart,

further down the road. It was standing still, certainly, while the butcher boy flirted with the maid up at the house where he was delivering meat, but it could move when it liked and it had not passed them yet. Oh, it was only his fun. And so on they went at the same pace, the hedges crawling by as though they were loath to lose such amiable company.

But how comes it that a young man of twenty-four arrives to pay a visit to a man of thirty years his senior, and old at that? What possibly can two such natures have in common? Yet it is no more strange than that an old gentleman of the French nobility should take up his abode in a Bloomsbury boarding-house; it is no more strange than many another of the incredible things that happen in this most strange of worlds.

Two years previous to the arrival of Arthur Dalziel in Sunningham, Mr. Somerset had paid a visit to the county of Cambridgeshire in a vain search for a specimen of the large copper butterfly which every treatise on the science of Entomology will convince you to be extinct. There he had met a youth who had carried over the boyish enthusiasm for catching butterflies until his last term at the 'Varsity. They had compared notes. Collections they could not compare; but the invitation had been issued then with a blind disregard for consequences and but a vague understanding as to when the visit should be paid.

Two years had gone by. Mr. Somerset had practically forgotten the existence of young Dalziel until, at one of the river regattas, he had run across him again, introduced him to Rozanne and renewed the invitation to see his collection. With his eyes turning from Rozanne, Dalziel had asked boldly for a definite date. A definite date had been given him.

And now he had arrived.

The station fly turned through the open gate on to the gravel drive leading up to the door of the Red

House and, at the sound of it, one of the curtains shivered in an upper window, then fell back into place as though a breath of wind filtering through the mass of climbing roses on the window-sill had just lifted it gently and rearranged its folds.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE COLLECTION.

THIS passion for collecting has nothing to do with science. It is a phase of youth, pursued strenuously between the ages of twelve and sixteen; sold ruthlessly then for what it will fetch. Sometimes it returns again at thirty, when you are just beginning to think how fine a thing it was to be young. Then you start collecting once more; anything, it little matters what—just to repeat the sensation of youth. Finally it comes with old age. Here youth had nothing to do with it. You collect, and your principles are certainly more scientific then, but the instinct is that of a miser; the delight you find in your rows of beetles or your boxes of eggs is simply the miserly delight in a hoard.

And when it comes to the miser showing his hoard to one who has passed the phase of his youth, you will find the essence of egotism in the one and the extreme of boredom in the other.

That first evening when, after dinner, Mr. Somerset took out his collection and had the dining-room table cleared for its more convenient display, was one which called for the most strenuous effort of patience on the part of young Dalziel.

He leant on the table, his eyes wandering to Rozanne's face whenever the old gentleman gave him opportunity, and prayed that each box as it was dragged, smelling of camphor out of its case, would be the last.

"Do you collect, Miss Somerset?" he asked in a moment's interval.

"I? Oh, no," she laughed. "There must be some b-butterflies left to fly about in the world. I'd much sooner see them out in the garden than—" She nodded with her head at the pile of boxes. He looked up to see if the old gentleman had heard that last remark. Not a word of it! He was pinning in a fresh specimen of the Clouded Yellow variety in place of one that had been damaged in the collection. Moreover, the miserly collector hears nothing which does not directly concern his own specimens.

Dalziel smiled, smiled at her, just that little interchange of thoughts which, when the third person present is unaware of it, leads to a better understanding. From that moment they entered into a tacit collusion to deceive him. At least Dalziel knew the full extent of her sympathies with entomology, and if she did not actually know his, she might have guessed them.

When the next opportunity for conversation came —the putting away of the last box containing the beetles and the reaching down of the first of what promised to be an interminable number containing the butterflies—Dalziel asked her if she was fond of music.

She nodded her head. Strictly speaking, it is not the best of manners for a lady to nod her head in answer to a question, but there are various ways of doing it.

"Do you sing at all?"

Mr. Somerset planted the first box heavily on the table and dusted the glass with a coloured silk handkerchief.

"I'm beginning first with the greylings," he said; "every one of these I caught myself. You'd hardly believe there were so many varieties."

Dalziel struggled to give his attention. It was

quite useless. He was far more interested to hear an answer to his question.

"Yes, I do sing," replied Rozanne. "Oh, but very little, I've really hardly sung at all since I came away from the convent."

"What are you saying, Rozanne?" The old gentleman looked up, blowing his nose with the coloured silk handkerchief. "What are you saying? You mustn't interrupt, dear. Mr. Dalziel's interested. You see, Dalziel, of course you know the majority of these. But have you ever seen that species before?"

It was all a see-saw at cross-purposes. Whenever he could, without a breach of manners, withdraw his attention from the endless case of butterflies and lead the conversation with Rozanne towards the suggestion that presently he should come and hear her sing in the drawing-room, Dalziel did so. But all his efforts were fruitless. Mr. Somerset, benignly oblivious of coercion, toiled wearisomely through his labour of love. Oh, he took an unconscionable time over it! Rozanne knew the business. She had been through it many times before. But Dalziel thought it was never going to end. When the last case of butterflies was put away, he stood up with an inward sigh of relief.

"Would it be too late to sing me a song now, Miss Somerset?" he asked. He felt there would be sanctuary in the drawing-room if they could only once get there.

"You haven't seen the m-moths yet," she whispered. "There are fifteen cases of moths."

Then she laughed. Her uncle's back was turned. How could she possibly help it? His look of despair was so positively comical. Many another had she seen wearing just the same expression—not so obviously as he, perhaps. She always tried to save them from the ordeal. M. le Vicomte, she had saved already. It always seemed to her as if her uncle

were an ogre who dragged unsuspecting visitors to his lair, from the tortures of which, she did her best to save them. It had been impossible to save this victim. He had been such a willing dupe. She had thought he was one of those who took that incomprehensible delight in the pangs of martyrdom. Now she saw her mistake. There was still the case of moths, and his endurance was already exhausted. How could she help but laugh? It was so ludicrous.

"You've got to see the m-moths now," she repeated. Oh, this collusion was very dangerous! Give two people a secret to keep from a third party and they are bound to come at some understanding of friendship in the holding of it.

"Now we come to the moths, Dalziel," said Mr. Somerset, laying the case on the table and dusting it as before. "I think I may say that I've got the best private collection in the south of England. Rozanne has helped me a lot over this. She carries the bicycle lamp while I go round the trees in the garden with rum and treacle—excellent thing rum and treacle, excellent. Rozanne, you look tired. You'd better go to bed. You've seen all these before. You go to bed."

She held out her hand obediently to Dalziel. He took it, too chagrined to notice the twinkle of amusement in her eyes.

"You'll have to sing to me to-morrow," he said.

Mr. Somerset looked up.

"Is she going to sing? Oh, all right, very well; I've got to get ready for my bees, they'll swarm any day now. You must come and see my bees. Good-night, my dear." He gave her his cheek to kiss without taking his eyes off the case of moths. "These are Burnets, you see, Dalziel. I'm rather proud of my transparent specimens. They're only to be found in Ireland, you know; never been seen in this country yet."

He looked round. Dalziel had gone to the other end of the room to open the door for Rozanne. When he returned, the old gentleman said the whole introduction over again—his introduction preliminary to the exhibition of the moths, which never varied.

"These are Burnets, you see," and so on.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SPRING ONION.

DURING the next week Rozanne came to tea but once. The next day after the arrival of her uncle's guest, she wrote a little note to M. le Vicomte. The maid from the Red House handed it to Courtot at the door of the cottage.

"For the old gentleman," she said.

Courtot lifted his eyebrows, shook his head.

"I do not know," he replied. He did not even put out his hand to take the letter.

She turned the envelope round, showing the name.

"I don't know how you pronounce it," she said.

He looked at the writing.

"Oh, that is my master, M. le Vicomte du Guesclin."

"Well, he's an old gentleman, isn't he?"

She spoke in the independent tone of voice of the ordinary English domestic. Courtot resented it. One can just fancy that he would.

"When you, mademoiselle," said he, "are a few years older you will speak more respectfully of age. Do you wait for an answer?"

She tossed him a negative over her shoulder and Courtot closed the door.

"*Bourgeois!*" he muttered, "*bourgeois!*" and he carried the letter into the dining-room, where M. le Vicomte was at breakfast.

"A letter, M. le Vicomte."

He laid it by his side on the table and departed.

The Vicomte picked it up. It was the first letter she had written him. He wavered between delight and apprehension, wondering what it could be about.

When one is young, there is no implement sharp enough for cutting the obdurate flap of an envelope; later on one lingers over it. Half the pleasure lies in pondering upon what the contents may or may not be. In youth—but then youth is all impetuousness.

He put it down again on the table and went on with his breakfast. Five minutes later and he picked it up once more, inserting the edge of a table knife with careful precision beneath the flap and neatly cutting it open. In just the same way he had opened the letters which he used to get at the post-office off the Tottenham Court Road, in the little stationer's shop where presided the old lady with the cork-screw ringlets.

This is the most obvious characteristic about age. When once you find that you are beginning to do the same things in precisely the same way—no variation whatever in your methods, no susceptibility to the influence of the moment's mood—then it is just as well to admit to age. The servant from the Red House was quite right. M. le Vicomte was an old gentleman; but that did not justify her statement in Courtot's eyes.

He spread out the letter before him and was reading it for the third time when Courtot came to clear the breakfast things away. Then he looked up.

"I shall not require tea in the garden this afternoon, Courtot," he said quietly.

"You are going out, Monsieur?"

"No; oh, no."

He said it quite cheerfully, quite casually. Merely

it was that he did not want it. That was what Courtot was meant to understand. But Courtot's comprehension was of finer quality. He had happened to see the young gentleman drive up to the Red House the day before; now he went back into the kitchen carrying the breakfast things, and seating himself at the table, he gazed out of the window into the garden, fixing his eyes upon the empty wicker table under the apple tree, as if the table or the apple tree had anything to do with it. Oh, he was a sentimentalist, was this good fellow Courtot. Most men are.

But when the next day and the next passed by, and there was no Rozanne and no tea under the apple tree, you could not but have felt that intangible sense of something wanting, something lost in the atmosphere of quiet reserve which surrounded those two old French romantics in the little cottage at Sunningham.

They hardly spoke to each other. They were really very miserable, both of them. It was all very well to say that despondency was *bourgeois*. M. le Vicomte forgot all about that. He was really very unhappy; yet the knowledge that soon—soon perhaps he would be rich again, more than rich enough to ask her to be his wife, brought him some consolation.

For Courtot there was none. He knew nothing of the possibility of the forty thousand pounds, knew nothing of the prospect of their return to Paris. All he realised was that a young gentleman had come to visit at the Red House—a fact which even M. le Vicomte was not fully aware of—and that Rozanne had not called to have tea in the garden for three consecutive days. There was no consolation for him. He sat dejectedly in the kitchen in the interval between his duties, and not even the most importunate appeals from Mrs. Bulpitt, when he went to see that good lady in the evenings, could

draw from him any expression of the trouble that was weighing upon his mind, beyond the statement, "It is *bourgeois* to be despondent, that is what M. le Vicomte says—*alors—je deviendrai bourgeois*—oh, la, la!"

She looked at him questioningly.

"If you talk to me in that language," she said, "you know what I've told you. It's as good as having secrets from me, and I don't think it's right. Now what is it? Did you burn the Viscount's dinner for him last night? I told you when you showed me that little bit of lamb that it only wanted forty-five minutes. Is that what it is?"

Courtot put his arm round her ample waist. This was sufficient testimony that he had no secrets. When he kissed her that clinched the matter.

"It is nothing," he said, "nothing, *ma cherie.*"

Fancy calling a washerwoman who is forty-nine years old *ma cherie!* But there are ways of doing it.

When he tried to kiss her again, Mrs. Bulpitt pushed him away. "You'd better not do it any more," she said warningly. "I'm afraid I must seem very disagreeable, I've been eating onions. I ought to have told you that at first, but you do kiss so sudden. There's no telling when you're going to do it."

"*Eh, bien!* He shrugged his shoulders resignedly. "It is I surely who am to mind, and I do not. You English, I do not understand." He looked at her in despair. "Because you eat onions, *mon Dieu!* The good God made them; is it not so? And is He ashamed? Is He disagreeable? Ah, *qu'non! 'du tout! 'du tout! du tout!* That is no secret. It means, of course, of course not. Tell me where you keep your onions? Have you eat them all?"

"No, there are some in that cupboard. They're spring onions too. They come out of my little bit of garden at the back. I cut them myself."

He ran to the cupboard. A plate of them was facing him as he threw open the door.

"*Allez!*" he exclaimed. "Now I become disagreeable also." He picked up the first that came to his hand and bit it through. Then he turned to her.

"Now, Mrs. Bulpitt, you and I and *le bon Dieu*, we are all, oh! such disagreeable people! But you will kiss me now because I smell myself. *Voila!* What a world!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE RESOLUTION.

IMPETUOUSNESS is in the blood. And even that is not quite true; for so much has it to do with the speed of passage at which the blood passes from the heart to the brain that it cannot be actually defined as a definite quality. Certain it is that the older you become, the more lethargic is the running of that vital stream, the more sluggish in their effect are the ideas that move you to determined action.

It may be said that his falling in love with Rozanne had come quickly enough to M. le Vicomte; that it is only when the veins are the bed of a mill race that one falls in love at first sight. But this is not a true argument. All that was the mirage, the phantom oasis. He had but dropped back to his youth. He was only loving again, the continuation of that very same emotion which he had known for her mother, Rozanne de Pontreuse.

But when it came to the definite action of asking Mr. Somerset for her hand, then you might have seen how slowly the blood must have been toiling through the veins. He was not rich enough. How

dare he presume to ask her to share his poverty with him. But in his place a young man would have laughed at poverty. The world would only have been waiting to lay its fortunes at the feet of a young man. He would have taken that for granted and urged his suit without a moment's delay.

Even then, when M. Courvoisier came with his wonderful and unexpected news, the old gentleman was not spurred to immediate deeds. When the money was actually his, then—ah, yes! then. But before then would be too soon; before then would be unwise.

So he would have continued, waiting on, until M. le Marquis de Pontreuse was dead and the will had been made public, had not circumstance—that master of every situation—driven the blood in a mad race of apprehension beating from his heart in a wild rush to his brain and urging him to action.

On the morning of the fourth day of Rozanne's absence, he was standing at the window of the square-roomed hall, looking out on to the road. This was the first time since he had come to the cottage that he had left Nature to do what she liked with his roses. Every other morning you might have seen him, wearing a pair of rough leather gardening gloves to protect his hands from the thorns and moving from one rose bush to another with a bowl of soap and water and a small penny squirt, syringing the shoots that were harbouring the pestilent green-fly. He really thought he did such an amount of good. But, practically, you can't do much to thwart the affairs of Nature with a penny squirt and a little soap and water. To borrow an expressive phrase from the vocabulary of slang—it is not on to do. Yet, until this morning, he had rigidly persisted in it, and the few green-flies that had fallen from their occupation made scarcely any difference to the life of the rose, there were so many that clung on.

This morning they were at liberty to stay there,

all of them, whilst he stood in the hall, looking out of the window, quietly telling himself that he ought to be ashamed.

He spoke aloud under his breath. You might have seen his lips moving.

"This is the way with you," he was saying to himself. "You are never contented. It was just the same with you in Paris years ago, my friend. You chafed and you worried because you had nothing to make your heart beat, and then, when the good God sent you the most beautiful woman in the world, you must needs worry your soul to a shadow because she could not be yours. You want too much, my good M. le Vicomte, you want too much. It was the same in London. Every night, when you went to bed, you crossed yourself and asked the good God to give you back what you had lost. And upon my soul, when I come to look back upon it all, it was not so terrible a time in that boarding-house, not so terrible by any means. The hashed mutton was monotonous perhaps; Miss Cubbitt was a little bit too—too insistent, but there was coffee in the afternoon in the Tottenham Court Road. When first you had that to look forward to, you were pleased enough, but, *mon Dieu!* how soon did you become discontented again? Oh, very soon, very soon! And now—now when you are going to be rich again, when everything looks—oh, ridiculous! —you are discontented once more, just because this little child of yours has to do her duties to her uncle's visitors. Oh, my friend, my good M. le Vicomte, there must be something *bourgeois* in your nature after all. Go and look after your roses, my friend. While you stand gaping out of this window there are green-fly eating away at the heart of your best blossoms for which you are responsible to the good God Himself. Go and look after your roses—"

And undoubtedly he would have gone had not circumstance stepped in at that very moment.

Down the road, with a sun-hat swinging loosely from the ribbons that were tied beneath her chin, walked Rozanne. She was laughing. She was talking. He caught the sound of her little stammer upon a passing word and his heart—yes, over sixty years of age, but his heart beat the faster. She was with their visitor, her uncle's guest. Instinctively the Vicomte's eyes rushed critically to Dalziel's face. Her uncle's guest! Her uncle's friend! But he was young! He was a boy! His heart almost dropped into silence. How could it be? How could that old gentleman, that very old gentleman up at the Red House, have so young a friend as this? There must be some mistake! Surely there must be some mistake.

But he knew it was true. Inexplicable though it was, he knew it must be true. Then the blood flowed as swiftly as you please—it tingled through his veins. It was jealousy—anything—call it what you like, but it drove him to the doing of what he had so long, so foolishly postponed.

There, before his eyes, she was being taken from him. Do you think he thought of chivalry then? Where is the man who would. Fate had robbed him once. It would not rob him a second time—oh, no! He would make sure of that.

Instinctively, unconsciously, he took out his snuff-box. In all moments of extreme emotion he did that, even if it were only to conceal his emotion from himself. Tremblingly his fingers pinched the powder and lifted it to his nostrils; and there he shook it while he watched them passing out of sight.

Now something must be done.

He said it aloud, snapping the catch of the snuff-box and putting it back again in his pocket. Not a day must be wasted now. He must go to Mr. Somerset. He must ask Mr. Somerset for his permission to speak at once to Rozanne. No matter if the Marquis de Pontreuse were to live for another

year, he must ask now or it would be too late.

The thought of speaking to Rozanne herself without permission did not enter his consideration. That was the way these things were done when he was a boy, and he was not beginning a new youth now, it was only the old youth over again. That was why he did things in the old way.

He turned round, straightening his shoulders, that gesture so characteristic of him when the world, as he knew it, had to be faced. Just so had he held himself erect that evening when he had returned to the boarding-house after his first visit to the restaurant in the Tottenham Court Road. In just that manner had he followed Julia upstairs with her enamelled cans of hot water, saying to himself, as he forced a smile to his lips:

> "When the spring comes round again
> There will be another bud
> For your eyes to see."

Ah, he was brave, was this M. le Vicomte! He had the spirit. If it was slow in those days in driving the blood a-racing through his veins, yet he had the spirit when the occasion demanded.

He rang the bell. Courtot entered the little hall.

"My hat and stick, Courtot, and my gloves. I am going out."

What is instinct? There must be something in it, something almost uncanny, something very strange. In the tone of M. le Vicomte's voice, Courtot not only heard the note of determination—that was but common observation—but he knew what was about to take place. His master was going to act. Something was about to be done, and, as if he knew only too well what that was, he spent, oh, so much trouble, gave such infinite care to the brushing of the old silk hat. Never had it shone so brightly. Even M. le Vicomte noticed it when he brought it down.

Standing before a little mirror, he settled it on his head—the exact angle. Then Courtot handed him his gloves. When he had put them on he settled his cravat. Then he took his malacca cane. He was just going.

"One moment, monsieur."

"What is it, Courtot?"

"A brush, M. le Vicomte."

He ran and got the brush and sedulously brushed the Vicomte's coat till not a speck was to be seen on it. Then he opened the door and bowed as the old gentleman passed out.

The Vicomte walked down the path and out into the road. Then he turned towards the Red House.

"One would almost think," he said in an undertone to himself, "one would almost think that that good fellow knew what I was going to do, the way he brushed my coat and my hat; my hat—it never looked so well. I shouldn't be surprised if he brushed that too when he was upstairs. I shouldn't be surprised."

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHO WAS MRS. SIMPKINS?

YES, Mr. Somerset was in.

The maid whom Courtot had reproved showed him into the drawing-room.

He was standing there, looking out into the garden, where Mr. Somerset's bees were hovering over the brilliant white borders of Mrs. Simpkins' pinks, when Rozanne's uncle entered.

Who, by the way, was Mrs. Simpkins?

Unfortunately it has nothing to do with M. le Vicomte or the issue at stake; but it is such a human question that it must be worth while the asking.

Who was Mrs. Simpkins? She must have been a charming old dame. You may be sure there were plenty of lavender sprays in her linen chests. I guess she was fond of the flavour of cloves, too. If ever she made puddings, which is just the sort of thing she would do, you may be bound she reached up for that little bottle of essence of cloves that lay hid behind the bottle of cochineal on the top shelf of the kitchen dresser. And in her apple tarts—ah! Well—even Mrs. Beeton advises cloves in an apple tart.

But every summer, we do talk such a lot about Mrs. Simpkins and her pinks and no one ever takes the trouble to ask who Mrs. Simpkins was. For all you know, Mrs. Simpkins may be still. If she is, you will probably find her living in some thatched little cottage just off the road that runs through a quiet Devonshire village. There are sure to be tall standard roses up the red-tiled path to the front door, not wonderful roses by any means, but those huge great blooms of pink and white that seem to fit in so well with one's memory of the days when everything was simple, the days of simple hearts and cabbage roses, those days which so few of us ever talk about now.

There will be sweet-williams too, and columbines in that old garden that belongs to Mrs. Simpkins. Hollyhocks—oh, yes, there must be hollyhocks as well. And in the garden behind the cottage, in a huge round bed like a gleaming sundial of ivory, the figures on which a sun that is so brilliant has obliterated, you will find her bed of pinks. And far away you will taste the scent of cloves in the air, and far away you will hear the hum of bees as they hover in the lazy heat over the thousand and one blossoms of Mrs. Simpkins' garden.

If ever you see a cottage like this in the country, and someone asks you "Who lives there?" you must answer—oh, and with such an air of conviction—

"Who lives there? Why, Mrs. Simpkins." The chances are you may be right, you never know. I don't believe anyone will ever know who was Mrs. Simpkins. Go to-morrow morning and ask a florist "Who was Mrs. Simpkins?" No, don't! You had better not. He might tell you that she was the wife of a butcher whose brother was a florist and that she lived at Brixton, and was the mother of fifteen children. He might tell you that there never was any Mrs. Simpkins at all.

No, don't go!

I can understand now why no one ever asks.

They might find out.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CONSENT.

WHAT a digression!

But Mr. Somerset was in. He lurched awkwardly into the room, cleaning his spectacles with that coloured silk handkerchief of his which did duty for everything. Red and green it was—just the colours, in fact, which you might have expected.

"Good-morning, good-morning, M. le Vicomte," he said, "you've come to see my collection at last, eh?"

The old gentleman was so very polite. He knew that unless he was particularly careful, this actually would be the result of his visit. It was almost taking a mean advantage of him.

"No, not the collection this morning, Mr. Somerset," he replied gently, but with determination. It was better to be direct, to be firm; far better to nip that prospect in the bud at once. He used the same kind of gentle deliberation as when he syringed the

green-fly on his rose shoots with that penny squirt of his. Ah, that little penny squirt! It sounds so ridiculous an instrument for a gentleman of the French nobility. But that really is only because it cost a penny. It could be quite efficacious if you squeezed it hard enough; for that reason perhaps it was ridiculous in M. le Vicomte's hands, because he never did. It would not have been ridiculous, however used, if it had cost ten shillings.

When then he said, "No, not the collection this morning, Mr. Somerset," in his firm but gentle tone of voice, that enthusiastic entomologist was in no way discouraged. He had often heard these modest remarks before. People were no doubt considerate. They thought of the labour they might be giving him. But it was no trouble, it was no labour; in fact it was a pleasure.

"Well, anyhow," he said, "come into the dining-room. This is Rozanne's sanctum. I can't abide it—all these little knick-knacks that women stick up. They get it from the Roman times I suppose—the penates. Upon my soul, I don't blame servants if they break things in the drawing-room. If I had to dust in a room like this, I should break everything first as a precaution against shocks to my system. Come into the dining-room, M. le Vicomte."

That must have been where Rozanne got her idea of the ogre from—that sentence—"Come into the dining-room." It was always the beginning. It always is. Witness even that delightful nursery rhyme about the spider and the fly. Every ogre invites his victims into his eating room and they sit down to a huge meal of something—porridge in the case of the ogre, butterflies it was with Mr. Somerset.

Had the Vicomte been warned of this, he would have refused the invitation. But he knew nothing. Unwittingly he obeyed and, taking one last look at

the room—Rozanne's room—where every vase filled with roses was instinct with the gentle touch of her fingers, he followed Mr. Somerset into the dining-room.

The door was closed behind him and his host crossed the room eagerly to four huge piles of cases standing in an alcove, which the architect of the house had no doubt thought would conveniently hold a sideboard.

"Now," he said complacently—now when he had got his victim safe within his lair—"now, we will begin, I think, with the beetles. They are not perhaps so interesting to look at—at least, not from the non-collector's point of view—which point of view, I take it, M. le Vicomte, to be yours."

Gripping one of the cases, he turned round with such a genial smile upon his face. He was not always as considerate to his visitors as this; but now in the back of his mind, there was almost consciously a definite thought that this victim was going to prove rather difficult to deal with. If the truth were really known, he felt somewhat apprehensive of the final result. It seemed quite within the bounds of possibility, as he caught the look in M. le Vicomte's eye, that the collection might not be shown at all that morning. He was not really surprised then when he heard the old gentleman say:

"My dear Mr. Somerset, I am sorry, but if it is the same to you I will see the beetles another time —I—"

"Oh, but, M. le Vicomte," said he—he could not let it pass as easily as this. He laid down the case significantly upon the table—"I am sure you will be interested, and this is a most excellent opportunity. We shall not be disturbed. Rozanne is away on the river with young Dalziel; they've taken their lunch. You'll stay and have lunch with me, and we can see them properly then."

He is notoriously selfish, is the miser, and compassion is a sentiment of which he knows nothing. But M. le Vicomte held to his own. As consistent as was possible under the circumstances with his idea of politeness he was obdurate.

"I have come, Mr. Somerset," he said, "to say something to you which is to me of great importance. It would be impossible, believe me, for me to do myself justice if I were engaged in looking at your interesting collection at the same time. Will you excuse me then and hear what I have to say?"

Very reluctantly Mr. Somerset picked up the case of beetles again. His face was positively ominous with disappointment. Snatch a bone away from a dog and then study the expression on its face. This is what happens with the man grown old from habit when you force him from his groove.

M. le Vicomte waited until he was actually putting the case back upon the pile which stood in the alcove; then he coughed a rather nervous little cough and felt for the snuff-box in his waistcoat pocket. He did not take it out. The desire was only to satisfy himself that it was there. Then he began:

"The fact," he said, "that Rozanne is not here suits my purpose just as well. It is about her that I wanted to speak to you."

"About Rozanne?" The case of beetles clattered down on to the top of the pile with the others, and Mr. Somerset looked round. "What is it?"

Now he took out the snuff-box. It was of real service now. The handkerchief fluttered about his moustache for a moment while he collected the words and arranged them carefully as he was going to say them.

"I have come to ask you, Mr. Somerset," he began, "for the permission to pay my addresses to your niece."

If only he had not waited. If only he had given Mr. Somerset no opportunity to show the greatness of his surprise, saying how much he loved Rozanne, explaining how much he had loved her mother—oh, saying anything. But he paused. And in that moment, looking into the amazement in Mr. Somerset's eyes, came again the cry of the voices "It's a mirage! it's a mirage! Come back! It's only a mirage!"

Yet, even then, he paid no heed. The sun was still high above the sand-hills, the paling light of the evening had not yet quite crept into the sky. By this time his little caravan of souls was very far off; it was such a small company of people, too, so small, and the voices sounded so faint in the distance. But hearing then, even then, a shudder, colder than that cool breeze from the palm shadows which were playing on his forehead, trembled through him.

For a moment M. le Vicomte was afraid. Supposing it really were a mirage. But he shook the fear bravely from him.

"Of course, I expected you to be surprised," he said quickly. He had not expected it. Oh, no, he had not. His request had seemed most natural to him. But it is a human instinct to take the first weapons our fingers touch when we have to fight that fear which rises within our own conscience. The man, the woman, anyone endeavouring to convince themselves against that inner conviction which is so pitilessly insistent, may be excused if their hand reaches for the hollow cudgel of untruth. In that moment, M. le Vicomte was striving to convince himself that it was natural, as well as Mr. Somerset.

"I expected you to be surprised," he repeated. "The—the disparity in our ages—of course—well, I suppose you would call me an old man."

He said that so pathetically.

There was no hazard here, as with Rozanne, for the sympathetic compliment to follow his self-depreciation. "I suppose you would call me an old man," he said gently, and he knew that that was just what Mr. Somerset would have called him.

But there are so many circumstances which combine to alter cases; so many events which depend one upon another that it is hard to get at the truth in any matter.

To the amazement of M. le Vicomte, Mr. Somerset replied bluntly:

"Oh, no, not at all, not at all. Are you in fact as old as I am? I don't call myself an old man. Not by any means. Why should I? No, my dear M. le Vicomte. An old man! Not at all! Though I admit you do surprise me. I—I had not thought of this."

There is a reason for everything. The greatest phenomenon in the world has its definite and simple reason concealed behind a most incomprehensible exterior. To M. le Vicomte, the attitude of Mr. Somerset's mind to his statement was inexplicable, however readily he accepted it. Yet the reason of it was definite. It was quite simple.

That morning Rozanne's uncle had received a letter from Mr. Brabazon of Thurnham House, requesting, in terms which had an ugly ring about them, the return of the money which he had lent him.

"You must admit I have been patient—" the letter concluded.

Now a man who is aware that he has been patient, is in a fair way towards becoming distinctly objectionable. To become conscious of one's virtues is to lose them. And some part of the truth of this had penetrated Mr. Somerset's mind. He was distinctly anxious. He was in a quandary. And a man of this nature, finding himself in one of life's corners, will take the first hand that offers to drag

him out. Here now was the hand—that of M. le Vicomte du Guesclin. The surprise which he had shown to the old gentleman was in reality nothing to that which he felt. He was quick enough to realise the wisdom of concealing it.

"I am—I am very pleased to hear it," he added. "And I'm sure I hope you'll be very—er—very happy. Of course, there is no concealing of the fact that—that it is a great honour for Rozanne, and I'm sure she will be sensible of it. Most certainly you have my permission. I should have thought you might have taken that for granted. I shall tell Rozanne myself how much I am in favour of the match; I shall certainly tell her."

There was a tone of commercialism in all this. M. le Vicomte tried to close his ears to it. The honour that it would be to Rozanne—his favouring of the match—there was something British, something of the shopkeeper's transaction about it which grated on his ears.

He would almost sooner have had it said outright, "M. le Vicomte, you are rather an old man to think of marrying a girl so young as Rozanne. The matter rests with her. Let her decide it. She knows her heart better than I do. Let her decide it."

What honour really was it seeing that he loved her? None at all. If she gave him her youth, was it not a far greater gift than any title in the nobility of France? If she gave him her love—what were all the kingdoms of the world compared to that?

It took just the edge from the keenness of his delight in having won so far. The mind is far from ever being satisfied. Things never quite happen in this world as the least fastidious of us would wish.

There is some sprite—an evil sprite no doubt—a sprite of circumstance, whose dearest joy it is to have a hand in every moment of pleasure, drawing the thread of hair across its finished edge and blunting of its keenest happiness.

Perhaps it is as well—it must be as well. If we ever knew the perfection of happiness, unspoilt by the faintest note of disappointment, nothing else would satisfy us. We should all become like the princess in the fairy tale—a single pea beneath innumerable feather mattresses would bruise our tender flesh and rob us of our rest.

It is not so enviable a thing after all to be a prince or a princess in this world, and no doubt it is unjust to speak of this little sprite of circumstance as evil.

The sprite is not evil. No, far from it! It is a good sprite.

"Then I have," said M. le Vicomte, "your consent."

"Most certainly."

The old gentleman bowed.

"I hope I may be as fortunate with Rozanne," said he.

"She is coming to see you this afternoon," said Mr. Somerset. "Did she tell you."

"No."

His heart beat quickly.

"Oh, yes, I heard her say this morning at breakfast that she must go and have tea with you this afternoon when she gets back from the river. You will have the opportunity to ask her then."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BACKWATER—SUNNINGHAM.

THOSE moments of waking when the mind is just conscious that the body is still asleep are worth all the rest of the day put together. Equally so in life is the value of those moments when you know that you are falling in love.

A thrilling consciousness that the thing must

happen, that there is no preventing it, that in a day or so you will be taking those oaths, the mere uttering of which brings with it so warm a sense of the annihilation of all time, so close a relation with the immeasurable greatness of the infinite, makes you dally with the sensation, linger over it, delight in it, because you know that, in the conventional order of things, it may never occur again.

So you lie awake in the early morning watching yourself asleep, and the sensation of pleasurable contentment is much the same as when you stand upon one side and observe yourself drifting into love.

You will not delay it too long if you are wise, but if there is any wisdom in you, certainly you will delay it a little. For these are the moments that are looked back upon with such wonder and such awe when the whole secret is out and there is nothing left to be told. It is therefore just as well to give some time to the making of them.

In this frame of mind realising every time, as he watched her, how wonderfully inevitable it all was, Dalziel took Rozanne out on the river that morning while M. le Vicomte was on his way to see Mr. Somerset at the Red House.

As he pushed the punt away from the slip, old Simmonds, the master of the boat-house, looked wistfully after them. There was a twinkle, half of humour, half of sentiment, though he might have been ashamed to admit it, in his light grey eyes.

As they passed out of hearing he turned round to one of his men.

"We've a lot to answer for, Dick," he said drily.

"Why?" asked Dick, with limited comprehension.

Old Simmonds nodded his head in the direction of the departing punt.

"We've a lot to answer for," he repeated, and, cryptic though the remark may have been, its repetition lent it a subtle meaning. Dick grinned,

certainly he grinned, but it is doubtful whether he really understood. More than probably he supplied some explanation of the remark to himself out of the fund of his own sense of humour and grinned at that. It is commonly our own appreciation of things which we laugh at.

On a mass of cushions Rozanne lay, her sun-hat discarded, her hair catching lights through a thin silk sunshade, all playing their parts in this inevitable romance which old Simmonds had taken upon himself to answer for.

Trailing her hand in the water that lapped up high over her wrist with every onward motion of the punt, she leant back upon the cushions, sometimes watching the expression upon Dalziel's face when his eyes were not in her direction, sometimes gazing at the fleet of clouds, with their white, wind-filled sails, which moved so majestically through the sea of heaven above her.

For a long stretch, until the little cluster of houses in Sunningham and the boat-house itself was lost from sight behind a bend in the stream, they said nothing. Youth is proud of the strength of its arm; and at twenty-five one has not quite got over the belief that a woman is won by prowess rather than by knowledge. Dalziel, winding up his sleeves high above the elbow, where the play of that forearm muscle could be seen to full advantage, was—quite unconsciously perhaps—obedient to the prompting of his youth. He certainly was very young. Nothing would have surprised him more than to learn that every time he bent upon the punt pole, gripping it with the full force and ardour of his desire to increase their speed, and Rozanne saw that knot of flesh rise in obedience to the strain, that she felt a shudder at the thought that men were so strong and ugly.

Had he been told that she liked him, not for this display of strength, but in despite of it, he would

scarcely have believed. So, for the first few minutes, he worked in silence, and their flat-nosed little craft shot down the stream, the water gushed in tiny fountains over Rozanne's wrist, the lines of poplars slipped away behind them and all the world seemed on a tide, drifting—drifting—drifting down into the very heart of the sunshine which is the ultimate destination of all true and happy-ending romance

At last, with a little stream of water dripping down to his elbows, he stopped, letting the punt pole trail away in the water behind them.

"Where are we going to have lunch?" he asked.

Rozanne woke from a dream.

"Are you beginning to think of lunch at half-past eleven?" she asked, with a smile.

He shook his head. He was not so young as that.

"No, oh, no," said he. "I haven't done any work yet. I only wanted to know how far you intended to go."

She turned her face to the sun and nestled her head into the cushions.

"Just go on," she said simply. "It doesn't matter where to."

This paid no tribute to his strength of arm. He might have noticed that, but it escaped him.

"You're enjoying yourself, eh?"

She nodded sleepily, more sleepily than she felt, but she wanted to convey how contented she was.

"You look jolly comfortable," he added.

"Yes, I am. Have some of these cushions and sit down too. We can drift."

"But don't you want to get a bit down stream?"

"No, what's it matter?"

He shipped the punt pole, a little disappointedly perhaps. If he was not working, the chances were he would tell her that he was in love. He did not want to do that—not yet—not just yet. She might be offended. It was so very soon. He had only

been there four days. It would be foolish, in fact, to tell her so soon as this. He believed that he knew something about the ways of women—the mind of a girl of twenty was not such an enigma to him as it was to most fellows whom he knew—and one fact which he confidently relied upon was that they did not like these sort of things sprung on them. They distinctly objected to that.

As he watched her lying back upon the cushions, he would have been ready to swear that a thought of love would be the last to enter her head. Girls of nineteen and twenty, if they had been brought up properly—as he knew Rozanne must have been from all he had seen of her in the last few days—never allowed such ideas to possess their minds. They were only children, and a rough-and-ready declaration of love from any man was enough to upset them, to frighten them out of their lives. If he were to tell her that he loved her then, what would she do? Ten chances to one, she would stand up with an imperious gesture and tell him to put the punt over to the nearest bank so that she might get out and walk home. Besides, however subconscious it may have been, he was enjoying those subtle delights of knowing that he was falling deeper and deeper into love; he was realising that when it did all come out, as come out it must, he would be able to hark back to this day when they were on the river together and say:

"I loved you then, but you didn't know it, did you? Every time you looked at me, I could have told you I loved you, but you didn't guess it, you never saw it even in my eyes—"

That was what he would be telling her soon, proving how strong, how deep, how lasting his devotion had been, and the fact that soon might quite easily mean to-morrow had no sense of humour in it to him. To-morrow seemed a very long way off just then.

But she wanted him to stop working, and then he would have to talk, and what on earth was there in the world to talk about but this wonderful knowledge that he loved every little expression of her face, every little movement of her body, everything she said and every word she left unsaid?

There was something he might say. He might tell her about himself.

So there he sat down on a cushion that she had thrown to him and told her all his hopes and aspirations. He was going to be called to the Bar. There was always a fortune to be made at the Bar if one worked hard enough.

"And are you going to work?" she asked.

He threw his head back. He looked up to the heavens as well, that direction towards the ideal, the great, the infinite, which even a bird recognises after it has quenched its thirst—let the biologist tell you that it is to give the water an easier passage down the throat, let him tell you it as vehemently as he likes, but he has a material soul.

Dalziel threw his head back with a smothered laugh.

"Work? Rather! I should think I was."

His father was a solicitor. His father would feed him with briefs. Success was only waiting for him to take it in his hands.

This is always true. Success is only waiting for youth. The failures are those who spend their youth upon other things and then, with withered hands, try to grasp that which is too heavy for them to hold.

And Rozanne listened to every word he said, her heart catching the infection of his enthusiasm, until, when he had finished, she declared:

"Oh, I'm sure you'll do wonderfully well."

"Do you really think so?" he asked.

"Yes, really," said she.

Their eyes met. Oh, he was perilously near his

confession then. The very words were dancing on his lips. He picked up the punt pole.

"Look," he said, "there's a backwater over on the other side, let's pull in there, tie her up and have lunch."

She nodded her head. She realised how near he had been then to that confession. There was even a wondering in her mind, a faint surprise that he had not spoken. If he had guessed that! But then they never do guess, and it is perhaps a fortunate thing that it is so. Idealism in a world as real as this is nearly everything.

He punted across the stream to the backwater and there they tied the painter to an old tree's stump. Then he sat back again on the cushion, reached for his coat and pulled a pipe from the pocket.

"Do you mind if I have a pipe before lunch?" he asked.

What it is to be young and not forget one's first lessons in politeness! It was quite unnecessary to ask her permission under such circumstances as these, but think of the pleasure it must have been to hear her give it! She looked into his eyes as she smiled when she acquiesced, and he tried to look into hers. But neither of them could manage it for long. It was only for a moment, then both of them looked away.

And when he had lit the pipe they sat in silence again, concealed away there in their backwater, where passers-by on the other side of the bank could only see the gleam of her sunshade as it caught a ray of sunlight falling through the branches.

What, after all, was there to be said but that he loved her? In looks, he said it over and over again. In the thousand little attentions that he paid her he conveyed it with every one. But the actual words, how would she take them? The fear of losing all scourged him to silence. And so they sat and watched the water in the main stream as it hurried

by, eddying round the tangled roots of an old willow which kept guard like a sentinel at the mouth of their little harbour of shadows. Their eyes followed the huge, heavy, white butterflies as they tumbled by, outside there in the sunshine where the river ran so blue; they watched the water spiders beating up against the stream with their angular legs always in motion, yet making no progress, like people running on a revolving platform, always moving yet never getting out of sight. He pointed out to her a willow wren as it hopped, piping, from one twig to another. They both held their breath as a water-hen stole out of the rushes with its brood of young—young waterchicks, like little toy birds made out of black angora wool with eyes, the heads of black pins, that glistened with eager apprehension.

"Oh, aren't they perfectly sweet!" exclaimed Rozanne, and before the last word was between her lips they had vanished.

At last Dalziel rose.

"I heard a church clock strike one," he said. "Where's the basket?"

Then they had lunch. Oh, it is good to be young! It is a fine thing to be able to consume hard-boiled eggs and heavy cake, and wash the meal down with a draught of fresh milk, feeling none the worse for it. One is so apt to forget as one does it that it is a feat which very few can perform with impunity and that one's own ability will not last for ever.

To these two it was nothing. They consumed all that the basket contained and were ready immediately afterwards to start again on their journey. Then they left the backwater, rode out on the main stream again, and refreshed, as is a giant with wine, Dalziel drove the punt forward with renewed energy.

Time was absolutely forgotten by both of them. There is no such thing as Time when one is in love, yet the clocks strike, and Rozanne heard one of them, that silvery sound of a church chime that

comes vibrating over water as a swallow flies with dipping wings.

"What time is that?" she asked quickly, roused suddenly to the sense of her responsibility.

"Half-past two, I should think," said Dalziel.

"Oh, we must turn at once. I must go and see M. le Vicomte this afternoon. I haven't been there for three days. We must get back at once. How long will it take you?"

"Half an hour."

"Could you really do it in that?"

Could he really do it in that? What was all this pride of youth for, if not to meet the demands of such a moment? Could he really do it in that? She should see. That she wanted it was sufficient.

When they pulled up at the slip, and old Simmonds helped her to step out, she looked up into Dalziel's face, red and burning with his exertion, but triumphant that he had still a minute to spare.

"I think you're splendid," she said simply. "We came back from below the marsh, Simmonds, in less than half an hour."

"Well, my word, that's good going, miss," he said.

Then Dalziel's cup was full. It was worth these three burning blisters on the palms of his hands, it was worth that sense of complete exhaustion. He was out of training, of course, but what did that matter? He had done it in less than half an hour, and—well—he was young.

What a wonderful thing youth is.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE NEW PINK FROCK.

M. LE VICOMTE had told Courtot that he might get tea ready in the garden that afternoon. There had been nothing in his voice to convey the momentous occasion for which it was to be

served. He had said it in much the same tone, there had been much the same inflection upon his words, as when he had told him those three days ago, and they had both been so unhappy, "I shall not want tea in the garden this afternoon, Courtot."

But in neither case was this discriminating Courtot deceived. He had an instinct as sharp as any woman's, and what is more, he possessed with it the power of comparatively reliable deduction.

Never had he taken such pains over the cutting of the bread-and-butter as on that afternoon. It was so thin—ah! you should have seen how thin it was—so thin that he had to hold his breath as he lifted it from the loaf on to the plate. Even then there was many a piece that broke in mid-air and "*Peste!*" he exclaimed; but he was just as careful to the very last slice. The sight of M. le Vicomte himself going round the garden from one rose bush to another, picking the best blooms and then placing them in a vase on the table under the apple tree, convinced him that he was right. That day was an event in M. le Vicomte's life. He was perfectly sure of it. Things were going to happen that day.

It had all begun with M. le Vicomte calling for his hat and stick in the morning.

The mind that departs suddenly from its groove must be bent upon some very important errand indeed.

Very closely, Courtot had watched his master's face when he had returned from the Red House. Of course he imagined he saw a lot of things. Instinct is so nearly wrapped up with the imagination that it is hard to tell when one is not working with the co-operation of the other. Really, he saw nothing at all. There was nothing to see. M. le Vicomte's face was quite calm and serene; he betrayed none of that emotion of exultant hope which was lifting so high in the heart of him.

But when he ordered tea in the garden, ah! then

there was knowledge. Courtot knew. All of which became the reason why the bread-and-butter was cut so thin that afternoon, why there were fat little sandwiches of new-cut cress. And M. le Vicomte grew no cress in his garden. But Mrs. Bulpitt did. She cut it herself for Courtot with a nice clean table knife, and wrapped it up in a spotless white pocket handkerchief for him, in which he might carry it back to the cottage.

"And you'll swear it's for the Viscount," she said, just the moment before she put it into his hands.

"*Le bon Dieu* Himself sees I do tell the truth," he exclaimed.

She believed him. That expression *le bon Dieu*, had a great effect upon her. She knew what it meant.

"Because, if it was for yourself," she said, "I'm not going to be wasting my cress for you to be eating it out of my company. If you want cress, you'll have to come and eat it here."

Then she asked him for a kiss, a thing she had never done with Mr. Bulpitt in the whole course of her existence. She asked shyly, half believing then that it was a forward thing to do. But it was his own fault. He had taught her to look lightly upon such matters—well, not exactly lightly, but certainly as no chapel-woman should. She even wondered at that moment, when his lips met hers, whatever Mr. Mathews would think of her.

Well, let him think! He couldn't kiss like her Courtot did, not in a month of Sundays!

It is an awful fact to contemplate, this ease with which human nature can drift from stern, northern respectability into the lax and pleasure-loving habits of the south. And Mrs. Bulpitt was a good Congregationalist. Mr. Mathews even, with all his sententious knowledge of life, would scarcely have believed this of her.

Yet there it was. She asked him to kiss her, and what is more, would have been cruelly disappointed

had he refused. That he did not refuse is hardly worth while the mentioning.

So there were cress-sandwiches for tea that afternoon. Courtot laid them unostentatiously on the table beside the plate of thin bread-and-butter. Rozanne had not arrived then, and M. le Vicomte was standing by in the garden to see that everything was for the best in what then was the best of all possible worlds for him.

As Courtot laid down the plate his quick eye noticed it.

"What is that, Courtot?" he asked.

"Some little sandwiches of cress, M. le Vicomte."

"*C'est bien ç'a.*"

He just caught, he fancied, a guilty look in Courtot's eye, which made him think the better of asking where they came from. It was not worth while to question the gifts which fell from the lap of a gracious Providence on such a day as that. If you are really a philosopher to the heart of you, you never question Providence at all. Life being as it is, and your Providence more than likely being some other man's folly, it is the true essence of philosophy to take all such things as they come and ask no questions. For if you have a heart at all within you, your pity for the foolishness of another will steal somewhat from the pleasure of the good fortune to yourself.

Therefore ask no questions of Providence. M. le Vicomte on that occasion, and he was only a philosopher in his way, he asked none. In such a moment as that, cress sandwiches were very desirable things; they added a look of importance to the table; they carried with them a subtle suggestion that pains had been taken to please the expected guest. He just accepted them and said nothing.

Then came Rozanne through the little wicket gate, so shaky on its drooping hinges, which gave entrance from the path round the front of the house into the garden.

To honour him, she had changed her frock. It did not escape his notice. He had his subtle knowledge of women, too, had M. le Vicomte. He knew, or rather had it not better be said in this instance, he thought he knew, the delicate process of change which takes place in the attitude of a woman's mind when she changes her dress.

Apart from all reasons of comfort, which in so fragile a matter as this can readily be put aside, there is a definite motive towards a definite action in every little change which a woman makes in her appearance. She may scarcely be conscious of it herself. She would deny it vehemently if accused. For a woman needs but little to satisfy her conscience and can quite easily convince herself of an unjust construction upon her actions if there be but the shred of another motive in her mind. And such a shred there usually is, for motives seldom run singly where a woman is concerned.

Rozanne, hastening to her room directly she returned, was actuated by three separate reasons for the changing of that frock. Comfort no doubt was the first. Certainly she would not have denied that. Oh, no! why should she? Then she was going out to tea with that most chivalrous, that most aristocratic of old gentlemen, M. le Vicomte du Guesclin. Surely the occasion demanded that she should put on her best frock? She would not have denied that —oh, no, not even that! But most vehemently she would have denied that she had changed her dress to that new pink frock which had been so carefully selected a week or so ago because Mr. Dalziel had courageously said how well it became her and because she would most probably see him for a moment or two when she went downstairs. With the greatest vehemence possible, she would have denied that.

But, then, you see, in the heart of her that was the real reason. And the real reason it is which a woman never admits to.

She even thrust the opportunity upon him when she came down into the hall. At first he was not to be seen. So she called him by name.

"Mr. Dalziel! Mr. Dalziel!" Wondering for the moment whatever she could say to him when he did appear. She was about to call once more, to give him the absolute fulness of opportunity, when he leant over the head of the stairs.

"Yes, Miss Somerset."

It was so unexpected that for the moment she stammered in confusion, unable to conceive of anything to say.

"I shall be back again in about an hour," she said at last.

He nodded his head. His eyes were too full of her and that new pink frock to think of any suitable reply. And she walked out of the hall, warm with that sense of consciousness that his eyes were following her, and that—well, that it was more comfortable and more—well, more considerate to M. le Vicomte to have changed her dress.

In the garden, before she could finally get away, her uncle detained her.

"Rozanne! Rozanne!" he called, and he came stumbling blindly over the borders of Mrs. Simpkins' pinks—we know now that it is not wise to ask who Mrs. Simpkins was—waving a letter in his hand. A huge gauze mask was covering his head, and with that long, lank body of his, he looked as though he had just emerged from some mediæval torture chamber.

"I want you to read this," he said, out of breath. "I think my bees are beginning to swarm. I've told Dalziel to go and shove on a mask and come and see them—but read this."

He thrust the letter into her hands.

She read it through, then looked up at him with troubled face. That expression could not last. He looked so ludicrous in his foolish mask. She laughed

"It's no laughing matter!" he exclaimed.

A sense of humour is a charming thing, but so rare, so rare.

"There's nothing to laugh at," he repeated sullenly. "I can't get the money, and there's only one way it's to be had if this confounded idiot Brabazon is to be paid at once."

Now she was serious.

"What way is that?" she asked.

"Your cousin—M. le Vicomte."

Oh, they are cunning, these old men! Age does not rob them of that; in fact, it only adds to the quality.

"Two hundred and fifty pounds is nothing to him. Where could I find two hundred and fifty pounds?"

Where, certainly? And he looked so ridiculous in that mask, as he turned his head about in a vague gesture as though looking for it, that Rozanne nearly laughed again. But in the next moment she realised the weight of the situation.

"Ask M. le Vicomte?" she repeated.

"Yes, ask him, I know what I'm talking about. He'll take it as an honour coming from you. That's his way. He'll take it as an honour and absolutely he won't feel the weight of it. He told me he banks with the Crédit Lyonnais—oh, I know he has heaps of money. Besides, it is only to lend it—only to lend it. You look as if I were suggesting he should give it."

"But why don't you ask him?"

"I?"

"Yes. It's not the sort of thing for me to do."

He had not thought of that. The knowledge that, under the circumstances, the Vicomte would not hesitate to lend Rozanne the money was all that had appealed to his mind. He had not considered appearances.

"Well, this man has the power to make me bank-

rupt," he said sulkily, " and I like the prospect of that no more than you would. How about your chances of getting married? You don't consider these things, Rozanne—you don't consider these things from my point of view. I'm afraid you're selfish—I really am—I'm afraid you're selfish. I expect you'd be surprised to hear that I've had a proposal for you already—"

Seeing her face, he checked himself. He had never really meant to say it at all. The moment had been one of impulse. He had spoken about her possibilities of marriage and that had suggested it; but he had never meant to say it. She would refuse to take M. le Vicomte at such a disadvantage and ask him, if she knew. He railed inwardly against his folly and turned hurriedly away to avoid the inevitable question.

" Who was it, uncle? " she whispered.

He started back to his bees. They were swarming, those bees of his, they must be swarming by this time.

" Who?" she repeated, and her heart was hammering out the answer—" who?"

" Oh, I expect you know, I expect you know," he said over his shoulder as he tumbled against a standard rose bush.

Rozanne turned slowly away to the garden gate.

Yes, she knew—oh! she was confident she knew. The heart of a woman never tells a lie, but then it only speaks to herself. What she says is another matter.

Oh, yes, she knew. But why had he spoken to her uncle first? Why not to her? Hadn't that spoiled it just a little bit—taken away that fluttering sense of the subtly inevitable and made it so sure, so certain, that the keenest edge of it had gone? Why had he not spoken to her first? There had been such opportunity in the lazy silence of that backwater, why, for example, had he not spoken

there? She would have understood. He could not but have seen that she would have understood. Surely she had shown it in her eyes?

But she did not feel this complaint against Fate to be very worthy of her. It was perhaps rather an ungenerous way of looking at things, because, after all, she was happy. There seems little that is abstract about the quality of happiness when once it comes to one. Abstract? Great heavens! It is a most tangible thing.

She looked up into the sun, still high above the poplar trees, and she smiled with her eyes at the sun and the sun smiled back again.

There was no doubt that she was happy. The request her uncle had made of her seemed fraught with but little difficulty then. She was happy, she was young, and the world—oh, the world was a wonderful place!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE MISTAKE.

YOU would have been surprised to feel how fast M. le Vicomte's heart was beating as he came down the little grass path between the dwarf rose bushes to meet Rozanne.

But then this was the climax of his youth; this was the moment in the pursuit of the mirage when it seems that the next mile of sand will be the last. Another mile and, tired, but at rest, he would be lying in the cool green shadows of the palm trees; another hour and he would hear from Rozanne's lips that all this struggle for existence, this striving to keep whole upon his back the delicate garment of self-respect, was as nothing compared to the knowledge that he had won out of the very hands of circumstance the freedom of his heart's desire.

As he came down the garden, and, taking her hand, bent over it to kiss it, it was to him as if all Time between the past and present had slipped away into the dust of forgetfulness and Rozanne de Pontreuse were coming to tell him that she was free. Closing his eyes, he could have imagined that he heard the splashing of the fountains in the gardens of Versailles and, when he looked up, the windows of his little cottage had become high and spacious like those of the palace at Trianon, the little gravel walk around the plot of grass was a stately terrace where marble statues were basking in the sun.

This was a mirage—a mirage indeed!

"And what do you think I have found to do with myself these four days, Rozanne?" he asked as he raised his head.

She took his arm as they walked across to the apple tree. How could she have thought that even that action would have held its meaning for him? She did not think. Happiness will have nothing to do with considered thought. It abhors it as Nature does a vacuum.

"I know I've been horrid," she said, "b-but you know I couldn't help it. Uncle Wilfrid asks Mr. Dalziel to stay, and then when he's shown him all his collection he expects me to entertain him."

"And so you have been forced into the onerous position of a busy hostess?"

"Yes, I suppose I have."

That then explained it all. The Vicomte was quite satisfied. She had found her absence no more desirable than he had. She would sooner have been with him every afternoon. That was really all he wanted to hear. She had not said so in actual words, certainly, but that must have been how it was. And he could not see that in his readiness to accept it as such, he was really but expressing the fear that it was not so at all.

In the nearing glamour of the mirage everything

is inverted, everything is upside down. A glaring truth becomes the most amazing fallacy, the most patent falsehood wears the semblance of a compelling truth. And it is here that there lies the danger in the phantom oasis; it is for this that the others cry to you "Come back! come back!" But by that time their voices are well-nigh out of hearing. All that reaches you is the faint, distant cry like the call of a bird as it speeds its way back to its mate.

Then they sat down under the apple tree, and while she drew off her gloves, the Vicomte watched her. He, too, was playing with the sensation, sipping the thought of all that was yet to come, before he lifted the cup of divine reality, threw back his head and drained it to the last.

"It is good to have you back again, little cousin," he said presently. "These afternoons have been like long winter days, and yet the sun has been shining. I think there must be some quality in the mind to make sunshine really shine, because a grey day can be brighter than the brightest day in summer when 'God's in His heaven' as your Mr. Browning says it. I don't know where *le bon Dieu* could have been these last three days. He certainly was not in His heaven, though there was scarcely a cloud in the sky."

This was all so true. She knew how true it was, though she could never have expressed it as he did. Just for his way of saying things, she almost loved him. Many and many a time in that garden, under that very apple tree, he had given expression to thoughts of hers which had been too subtle for her to materialise into words. And now—the real quality of sunshine was in the mind. How well she could understand that now!

"I know just what you mean," she said quickly. "I've felt that, just that, so often."

He leant forward with his elbows on his knees.

"And you are glad to be back here under the apple tree again?"

"Oh, yes, but of course I am. Why should I be anything else?"

Why indeed? But he did not see it in that sense. He leant back again in his chair, gazing up through the branches above his head.

"Ah, then God is in His heaven again! I remember it was just such a day—such a day as this, and as yesterday, and as the day before when your mother and I said farewell to each other in the gardens of the Tuileries the morning after the ball at the Russian Embassy. The sun was shining, there was a band playing somewhere near; the children were romping about the walks and the flowerbeds were brilliant with tulips. But there were no colours in anything to my eyes then. The voices of the children were pitched upon a shrill, discordant note. The music of the band seemed the irony of discord too, and that glaring sunshine was such a blazoned imitation of what sunshine can really be when it comes from the heart as well as from the heavens."

"But why did you say good-bye if it made you so unhappy?" asked Rozanne, wondering. Not really wondering—pretending to—pretending to herself as well as to him. In that one afternoon she had learnt the secret of all things.

M. le Vicomte looked at her with gentle eyes.

"I loved her, little cousin," he said, "and I loved her too late. That is why I have never married. That is why I have chosen to live quite alone. But here is tea; I have more to tell you presently. Oh, yes, I have a lot more to tell you."

If you could but have seen Courtot's face as he carried the tea across the little lawn to the table under the apple tree. Conversation was suspended. If only they would have talked, but they sat still and watched him. And he thought he knew so well

what they must have been saying the moment before and would continue to say the moment he had left. He had always conceived M. le Vicomte saying the most wonderful things when he made love. Was he not a Vicomte of the nobility of France? Did he not say everything beautifully, this good master of his? Besides, had he not once heard him say to Rozanne de Pontreuse in the days in Paris long ago:

"Rozanne, whenever my heart beats you will feel it, because you hold it in the hollow of your hand."

That was a wonderful thing to have said. Courtot himself could never have thought of it. So he imagined when his master made love, it must be different to anyone else in the world. He would have been surprised to learn what very little difference there is. He would have been amazed to find that his wooing of Mrs. Bulpitt was much the same as is the wooing of the highest in the land.

There are no two ways about making love. One man has the trick of it and another not, that is all.

But Courtot was not aware of this. He imagined he was interrupting his master in the most poetic of declarations, and to himself it seemed that he could never place the teapot on the table in time to get away before he had spoilt everything.

"Courtot's in a hurry," said Rozanne when he had departed.

The Vicomte smiled.

"I expect he is anxious to get away to have tea with his Mrs. Bulpitt," he said.

Oh, they were so wise, they did know such a lot about each other, this M. le Vicomte du Guesclin and his servant, Courtot. There was not a thought that passed across the mind of one of them but what the other, with such charming inaccuracy, could guess what it was.

"But who is his Mrs. Bulpitt?" asked Rozanne.

"She is," said M. le Vicomte, "a good woman

with a heart of gold and a face, oh! so plain. But Courtot has found that a heart of gold is worth all the beautiful faces in the world. He says himself, and he repeats it so many times, 'She is good—it may not be that she is beautiful, but she is good.' And so they are going to be married."

Rozanne clapped her hands together and laughed. "Oh, I'm sure he'll make her so happy!" she exclaimed. "What a romance! How lovely!"

They laughed together then over the thought of it, and Courtot, just peeping out of the kitchen window, smiled too when he heard their laughter.

"M. le Vicomte, he will make her so happy," he thought. And if he had known then that it was at his expense they laughed he would not have grudged it.

But now the laughter ceased. Rozanne had come to that moment when she felt it her opportunity to do what her uncle had requested.

It may have seemed easy before, easy when she had just heard the news he had given her; but now, faced with the reality of it, yet knowing that if she neglected to ask, her uncle would surely let the matter slide in his dilatory way, she hesitated—and simply because M. le Vicomte was so kind. Because, in fact, it was so easy, she found it so hard.

"Do you remember my telling you something about my uncle?" she asked at last. "About an investment he had made, and the money he had borrowed from Mr. Brabazon up at Thurnham house?"

She handed him his cup of tea as she broke through the first fence. It made her sentence sound more conventional.

M. le Vicomte nodded gravely. He handed her the plate of cress sandwiches.

"I have not forgotten," he said.

"Well, Mr. Brabazon has now written to Uncle Wilfrid demanding immediate payment."

Ah, now she felt it keenly. The fear that she was

about to lower herself in the eyes of M. le Vicomte, whose opinion—yes, without a doubt of it—she valued more than any other in the world, brought the tears to her eyes. They were tears of confusion, tears perhaps of a sense of shame; not the tears when one cries about things—not those tears. It seemed then a most despicable thing to have to do, and tears will come easily to the eyes of a girl of twenty. She wanted him to think the best of her. He had thought the best, the very best of her mother. And would her mother ever have consented to do a thing like this? She doubted it.

There is in the mind of the least and the greatest of us an inordinate desire to be thought well of, to be approved of, and by certain people. Some there are whose good opinion we count as not worth having, others for whose praise we will strain to the uttermost. Instinct, instinct alone, if the feeling be a true one—guides our choice in such matters. It is not, unless we are sycophants in the hearts of us, because a man holds precedence in the world that we shall wish to win his favour. No, the matter lies deeper than that. It is by what we see in the personality of him that we are led to our choice, that we are moved to desire so importunately his good opinion.

Such a man, with all whom he came in contact, was M. le Vicomte du Guesclin. Rozanne felt it. Even that pedantic entomologist, Wilfrid Somerset, was aware of it as well. To earn the unfavourable opinion of this courteous old nobleman was a state of things which everyone who knew him would strive consciously to avoid.

And now she felt that she was on the threshold of incurring his grievous disapproval. So rich as he was—he would find it a sordid business, this borrowing of money to gamble with. Speculation is always gambling when one loses.

In another moment she would have lost courage,

turned the matter aside, found the whole affair impossible; but when he saw the glint of the tears in her eyes—well, what could he do but take her hand, murmuring, "My little cousin, my little Rozanne." What after all was there for him to do?

Then she told him. Took no false responsibility of it on to her own shoulders. Why should she? Her uncle had asked her to speak. It was incumbent upon her to tell him that. And she told the whole miserable little story so quaintly, so much as you might expect a girl of twenty to talk about business entanglements, with phrases that would have meant nothing to you if you were not listening with your heart.

"And he wants you to lend him the money," she concluded in a sad little voice, pathetic, if M. le Vicomte had but been able at that moment to realise anything save the incredible impossibility of it.

"Two hundred and fifty pounds?" he repeated slowly.

Ah, it was all very well to be thought rich. He appreciated that part of it. But it had its drawbacks.

"Two hundred and fifty pounds?" he said again.

"Yes." She looked up and tried to nibble at one of those fat little cress sandwiches. "I know it sounds a heap of money to me."

"But not to me, eh?"

"Oh, well, do you think I should ask if I thought you were poor? You would tell me, wouldn't you, if it meant a lot to you too, because of course I shouldn't think—Uncle Wilfrid wouldn't dream—oh, you do understand, don't you?"

He looked up at her. He smiled. She made him almost forget how poor he was. That voice of hers, the plaintiveness of it, oh! he felt rich when he heard it. He might have been rich, it moved him, it urged him so much to do what she desired. Yet how could it be done? Thirteen pounds at the Crédit Lyonnais bank! Oh, ridiculous! Out of the

question! She must find out, she must know how poor he was. That was all there was about it. She must know. And then, what would happen then? Would Mr. Somerset withdraw his consent to their union? He might. One could never rely upon anything in this world, still less without money. Money was the key to so many things. But what would Rozanne think herself? How could she think less of him? It was not that he imagined it. But it went against the grain—oh, surely, it went against the grain to fall from, to alter even, his position in her eyes.

"Supposing you were to find out that I was very poor," he said gently, leaning forward and looking up into her eyes. "Supposing you were to find that I had not two hundred and fifty pounds in the world—?"

"Do you think it would make any difference?" she said. She stretched out her hand to him. "Surely you don't think that? If I'd thought that possible, of course I shouldn't have dreamed of coming, of saying this at all. But, when it isn't, when it couldn't be so. Don't you remember you told me that you lived in a house off Russell Square?"

He smiled.

"Yes, I lived in a house off Russell Square."

"Well, the rents of those must be nearly as much as that, perhaps more. Oh, please don't think I should have come if I'd thought the leading of it would have put the slightest strain on you! I couldn't have!"

Well, of course, how could he tell her? It is very well for your honest men, your men of strong minds, who have no sentiments for anything, not even for the blunted truth which they are so fond of expressing. It is all very well for them. They take a pride in being what they are, because they can never hope to be anything else. But supposing one

has been something other than what one is, it needs courage far greater than theirs to undeceive those who think of you as more. It needs giant courage to admit to the truth then, and if the sentiments of these things have weight with you at all, well, it is well-nigh impossible.

So M. le Vicomte found it. Yet the money must be lent or the truth must be told—and which? Which was it to be? He knew it was impossible to obtain money from M. Courvoisier before his uncle was dead and the will had been made public. Ah! But there was one way. If he should ever require money, the notary had told him, he could realise a substantial amount on those little historical treasures of his. *Bourgeois*, he had called it to himself—*bourgeois!* Yet there was something practical in it after all.

He took the snuff-box out of his pocket, gazing at it thoughtfully, rubbing a finger over the diamond letters on the lid. There was something practical in it after all.

Oh, but it would be a wrench! To part with them even for a moment brought him a sense of pain. He always fidgeted a little from one foot to the other when some other person, examining the snuff-box, held it in their hands. And to let it out of his sight for months—months—until that will was read and probate was granted! He looked up at Rozanne. It was for her sake. That made it worth while, oh, distinctly that made it worth while.

"What are you thinking of, little cousin?" he asked.

She hesitated. Should she tell him what she had heard? Perhaps he would understand still better if she did.

"I was thinking what Uncle Wilfrid said."

"And what did he say?"

"He said that if he went bankrupt there would be very little chance for me to be married."

"Did he say that? Did he say that?" M. le Vicomte was incensed. That was not a chivalrous thing to have said! "Oh, but it is not true. It is not true!" he exclaimed.

"You think really it isn't true? Because he told me that he had had a well—" She blushed—cheeks go crimson so easily at twenty—apples redden so easily too on a summer's day—"He said someone had spoken to him about me."

Was this true? Could it really be true? Had he told her so soon?

"And did he say who it was?" he asked quietly.

"No."

"But you guess?"

That smile of hers then! Of course, he thought it was for him. She would not have smiled so at a younger man. But then he thought he was young. Never was the mirage so close, so easily within reach as then. He thought he was young, that he had reached the very zenith of his youth. And when she smiled, as he found only those eyes of hers could smile, and when she whispered, "Yes, I think I can guess," surely it was no conceit, no insufferable pride in his own virtue of loving that led him to believe?

He leant so quickly forward, he took her hand so reverently, he raised it so wonderfully to his lips.

"My—my Rozanne," he said emotionally, "I have waited all my life to meet this moment when it came. Oh, *mon Dieu!*" He lifted his head—it was not theatrical. That raising of his eyes was so real—there was nothing dramatic about it.

"Oh, *mon Dieu!* Do you think if I had known this, I should have complained one moment out of all these years?"

Then, bending over her hand again, he murmured:

"My Rozanne—my—my Rozanne."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE TRUE SENSE OF COMEDY.

IF you suppose that pity be one of the strongest attributes of a woman's nature you are not far from the truth. It is pity which robs her of that judicial faculty whereby, if she did but possess it, a man might sit with hands in lap till the judgment day and rest assured that the justice of this world had not been mismanaged or abused.

But there must be no psychological aspect to this romance of the mirage. Experience teaches one that psychology coupled with Romance is not as yet understood.

Yet pity, nevertheless, if once you wake it in a woman's heart, will conjure more wonderfully for you than all the strenuous appeals to her intellect and her affection. And that word conjure is used advisedly, for it is a trick, and only a trick, that pity plays on a woman's mind.

In just those brief sentences of his, M. le Vicomte had wrung the pity from Rozanne's heart.

"I have waited all my life to meet this moment when it came," and "Oh, *mon Dieu!* Do you think if I had known this, I should have complained one moment out of all these years?"

What but pity could she feel for him then?

Oh, but pity for herself, too, pity for herself first of all. As he bent over her hand, as he raised his eyes above him, and as he bent over her hand again, there was a look almost of horror in her face with the realisation of the mistake she had made.

Then Dalziel had said nothing? It had been on her lips to say, "Ah, but you do not understand. It is all a horrible mistake!" It had been on her lips to say that, when first he had spoken, when first

he had shown her what had taken place. The words were balancing there, ready to fall when he had added, "Do you think if I had known this I should have complained one moment out of all these years?

The words had frozen then, just like drops of water that trickle down an icicle and freeze before they can reach the point to fall. She could not utter them. Pity deprives a woman also of the power to chastise—strength filters out of her. Her arm holding the rod falls limp. That proverb regarding the spoiling of a child was made for a woman. A father can thrash his son because he feels sorry for him, an argument which never appeals to sons until they are fathers themselves.

But apart from pity, apart from that dread of hurting so sensitive a nature as that of M. le Vicomte, Dalziel had not spoken. It was not so difficult a conclusion for her to arrive at then that Dalziel did not love.

Few women can draw a straight line. None can argue in it. Rozanne was torn in an agony of doubt. She scarcely knew which way to turn, yet she kept silence. She had neither the courage nor the want of heart to deceive him.

There are many women like this. Nature never intended them to be brought to such an *impasse* where judgment and decision have to be swift and direct. Theirs should be a path where the only choice needed is to guide their steps from crushing the roses beneath their feet.

A thousand reasons swayed her here. That is why the determination to a straight line is so impossible to a woman—a thousand reasons sway them. The sum of it all was that she could not tell him. The sudden one moment of opportunity had passed. She watched it floating away like a feather lifting on the breeze, rising now, then falling, but ever being borne further and further away until the moment was a mere speck of time in the infinite.

And when he raised his head from her hand the look of overwhelming surprise had passed. She was able to force herself to act for his deception.

"I spoke to your uncle this morning," he said. "I had not thought he would mention it to you so soon. In fact, as I understood him, I, myself, was to speak to you first. He said he was very glad. He wished me every happiness and success. But I have been trembling, do you know? I have been very uncertain of what my success would be. Because, Rozanne, you are young. You are younger even than you know, and though I hold all this happiness in the hollow of my hand now, still, I dare not close my fingers upon it. I dare not quite count it mine even yet. I am young no longer my little child; do you think you fully realise that? I cannot bring myself to take you so readily at your word"—she had said no word at all; but then he imagined it—"without reminding you that really, I suppose, I am an old man. The best part of my life has gone—your mother took that with her and keeps it in Pere-la-Chaise. And yet you make me feel, oh, so young again—do you know that? And that is perhaps what you see when you insist that I may not call myself old. But I bid you once more, once more while you can full well understand, look at this white hair—mind you it was white long before its time. Your uncle, for instance, his hair is scarcely grey, and there are not so many years between us—oh! no, only a very few. Yet I bid you take notice of it, and these lines too, and this white moustache. My eyes, they are young still—think what burns in them, but you must not look at my eyes."

He knew that his eyes were as young and as clear as they had ever been. That was why he told her not to look at them. He was trying so hard to be honest, to be straight about the matter. His heart was set in the right place. He knew what honour

meant, did this noble old gentleman. But we are human beings, every single one of us, which is a very simple-sounding accusation, though it touches the whole gamut of human weakness and strength.

"And now," he concluded, "tell me quite honestly; you need not mind. I have seen the world go by, and I know that a man can wait too long for happiness; he can find it as near his fingers as I do now and lose it at a touch. Tell me quite honestly if it seems to you that I am too old?"

He let her hand fall. He would take no unfair advantage. That was not his way. He knew, moreover, that a touch of a hand is coercion in such matters as these. And he looked into her eyes, waiting for the answer.

She tried to speak the truth. She tried to say, "Yes, you are too old," and by that imply, "You have waited too long for your happiness—the touch of your fingers and you have lost it. This moment that you have waited all your life to meet is a mirage. I just say 'You are too old,' and it must vanish before your eyes. There is no need for you to thank God—you are too old—youth is the only time in which to thank God, and all the complaints you have made in all these years, they are quite justified. Don't regret them, because it is too late. You are too old."

She tried to say it, but it was impossible. It seemed too cruel, too heartless a thing to do. She did try, but so utterly she failed. The tears rushed to her eyes. But he could not learn from them—no man ever does.

It is a certain thing to say that a man always reads a woman's tears to please himself. He can do no otherwise.

And when she said:

"No, no, I don't think that. How could I think that? I've always said you're not old, haven't I?"

Well, then—then he tried the matter no further.

He had done his duty. Is there anything more in life that a man can do, when he risks his happiness in the fulfilment of it?

Then he took both her hands in his.

"I shall do all that there is in me," he said gently, "to make you happy, to make you never regret."

She knew he would, but even then it was too late. The regret was planted already and the seed of it was too deep for him to ever unearth.

Possibly in time she might be reconciled. Not that she believed it then, oh, no! But she saw all the nobility of his nature. He had offered her freedom, and knowing at what cost, she could not but admire him for it. That, though, was all—admiration, the deepest pleasure in his company, but not love. Admiration is won from you—love is another matter entirely. You give love.

"And now," he said, "this other business, this very, very ugly business. What am I to say to that?"

Rozanne shook her head.

"By what time is the money wanted?"

"In a week's time Mr. Brabazon said in his letter."

"Oh, that means at once."

"Well, very nearly."

"Oh, it means at once, if one is to be dignified. Well then, I think I could let you have the money the day after to-morrow. Will that do?"

"Will that do? Why, of course, if it is convenient for you to lend it to us by then."

"Lend?" he echoed. "I never borrow, and I never lend. There are only two forms of exchange in this world, only two—giving and receiving. I will not hear of any others. I will not hear of being paid back. It is you who need it far more than your uncle. If he were to be made bankrupt, the greatest pain of it would fall upon your slender

shoulders. I give it to you, Rozanne, if there is to be any such thing as exchange between you and me."

She tried to smile with her thanks. It was a pitiful little effort, yet it served. No one possesses a great deal of discrimination when they are happy. He did not see behind the smile.

"I knew you would be as good as this," she said. "That was why I think I must have hated asking you so much. And now," she rose to her feet, "will you forgive me if I go? I promised I would be back in about an hour's time and it is long after that."

"She wants to be alone now," he thought, "it is so reasonable; I can understand it quite. She wants to be alone." And silently he walked with her down to the little wicket gate, kissed her hands again, and stood there watching her as she walked down the road towards the Red House.

"I think I shall make her happy," he whispered aloud to himself. "Oh, I think I shall. She is so like Rozanne—and Rozanne would have been happy—so shall this child too."

Happy! Had he but known it, the tears were raining down her cheeks as she walked, and her heart was whispering too, "Oh, I am so unhappy! so terribly unhappy."

Which all borders on that true sense of comedy of which life is so dexterously composed.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE BELIEF IN WOMAN.

SHE had been away more than an hour, but Dalziel was there, waiting, in the vicinity of the hall. The moment the door opened, he stepped out of the dining-room.

If young men had tact they would really be most

estimable beings. But tact is a matured accomplishment learnt through a multitude of most unpleasant experiences. Dalziel had none of it. He saw Rozanne had been crying. He remarked upon it.

"What's the matter, Miss Somerset?" he asked. "You've been crying."

There is no doubt he argued that if he did not draw attention to the fact she would presume he had not noticed it. It were better to be tactless than that. But then he saw no want of tact; not even when she threw her head back and walked by him up the stairs to her room, saying:

"Oh, no, it's only the dust in my eyes makes them smart a bit. A motor passed me on the road. I couldn't see for a minute after it had gone by."

He looked up the stairs after her.

Then why did she seem so cross, so little pleased to find that he had been waiting for her? The dust of that beastly motor had annoyed her, perhaps. She had got on a new dress, that was it! The dust of the motor had annoyed her. It was really not a bad thing after all to be able to understand women. It helped a good deal. Another fellow would have gone away worrying his life out, wondering whether he had said anything, done anything to displease her. Dalziel turned on his heel towards the garden. A smile was twitching his lips.

"Quaint little things," he thought sententiously. "Quaint little things. She'll be as cross as blazes till she finds out that the dust hasn't spoilt her dress. Look at the way she scudded upstairs, dying to find out. Quaint little things."

Now is one to call a man a fool because he believes when he is in love? Hardly! Belief is essential to ninety-nine out of the hundred. The important attitude of men towards women after all is to love them, not to understand them. And they are bound to make their ideal in the process. Now in a man's

ideal is the firm belief that women tell the truth. They don't, you know. Why should they?

The truth is not half so pretty on a woman's lips as the dainty conceit of a lie. If he were not so obsessed by his admiration for that abstract ideal of the truth, a man would be quite ready to admit it. He admits it already in other men's wives and other men's mistresses. Never, unfortunately, in his own, but then he is in love.

Had Dalziel been told the truth, that Rozanne was crying because she was going to be married to M. le Vicomte du Guesclin, would he ever have said "Quaint little things, quaint little things"? Not a bit of it! He would never have seen that she was crying because she could not marry him. She was going to marry someone else. That would have been quite sufficient for him.

And was it not infinitely better that he should have said "Quaint little things"? Oh, most decidedly! There is nothing but praise due to the ingenuity of Rozanne that she conceived the deception and drove a motor car with clouds of dust out of nowhere into the urgent necessity of the moment.

Until it was dinner-time, she concealed herself in her room. Dalziel waited in vain for those few moments before the meal, those delightfully stolen moments after the gong had been struck, and before Mr. Somerset came tumbling late into the dining-room, assuring everyone that the clocks in the kitchen must be wrong.

They were seated at the table before Rozanne made her appearance.

"Late again, my dear," said her uncle, forbearingly.

She took her place without comment.

Dalziel watched her expectantly. Something must have happened to the dress or surely she would resent the injustice of that remark. She said nothing. Then something had happened to the dress.

That meal was a dreary one. The conversation dealt entirely with the habits of bees in the swarming season. Dalziel listened while he ate food that was utterly tasteless. Something had happened to that pink frock. What on earth did it matter what sort of trees the bees chose to swarm upon if Rozanne was unhappy? He found the old gentleman intolerably inconsiderate. It was obvious that he did not understand women, quite obvious.

As soon as dinner was over, he found the opportunity to ask Rozanne to come and sing to him in the drawing-room.

Oh, why did he ask her? How little he understood. If he really loved would he not have said so long ago? He was only amusing himself, passing the time away, that was all. She set her lips. She would not care. Why should she care? She would go and sing with perfect indifference. It was only exposing a weakness to refuse.

"This piano was my mother's," she said as she seated herself before it. "It came from Paris. Of course it's very old. What shall I sing?"

Her fingers touched the keys. She must be indifferent. What did it matter what she sang?

"Vous avez beau faire et beau dire
L'oubli me serait odieux
Et je vois toujours sans sourire
Des adieux—des adieux."

She thought she was so indifferent. He did not love her. Would he not have told her so if he had? And so what did anything matter?

"Vous aurez beau dire et beau faire
Seule elle peut mon malguerir
Et j'aime mieux si persevere
En mourir—en mourir."

The courage to act went with that last verse. *En mourir*—she quivered on the first; at the repetition of

it her voice broke. A little sob choked her, the tears rushed to her eyes, and she fled from the room.

Dalziel jumped to his feet amazed.

"Well, I'm hanged!" he exclaimed. "I'd never have thought that a woman would have taken it as seriously as all that!"

And he meant the dress. He was still thinking it was the dress.

When a man once gets an idea about a woman into his head, and when, moreover, that idea flatters the vanity of his understanding, the whole army of king's horses and king's men cannot drag it away from him. He cherishes it to the last.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE BARGAIN.

THAT evening the Vicomte sent a letter to the post. Courtot carried it, wondering. It had something to do with Mademoiselle Rozanne. The very touch of it told him so. Besides, the circumstance was an unusual one. M. le Vicomte did not often write letters, and with the most natural impulse in the world, Courtot connected it with the stirring events of that day.

For a moment, under the light of the lamp outside the Crooked Billet, he was tempted to read the address. But conscience pricked him. He felt ashamed of himself and hurried on down the road where it was dark.

The next morning, M. le Vicomte put on his gardening gloves after breakfast, called out to Courtot to bring him the little dish of soap and water, and took his squirt down from the kitchen dresser. He was going to do his roses. Then everything was all right. How much that meant Courtot dared not

guess. There was still that young gentleman of the Red House to be considered. Courtot held him in very doubtful regard. He had not been happy in his heart since that afternoon when he had seen old Howard drive him up to the gate of the Red House, and he would not be happy or contented until he had seen him driven away again.

Still there was the letter he had posted the evening before. Surely that meant something. As he washed up the breakfast things and watched M. le Vicomte out in the garden, squirting away with his soap and water so gently but so conscientiously, he tried to imagine what it could be.

Could it ever be possible that he was sending for a ring? Oh, no, that was too good. That was too good to be true. Oh! it was no use. In good time he would know everything. It was just like that morning in the restaurant when M. le Vicomte had come in to lunch. He had had to wait then. He would have to wait now. Not for long perhaps. He blew vigorously down the spout of the coffee-pot and prayed *le bon Dieu* it would not be for long.

Then the bell rang. He hastened to the front door. Everything that happened had its inner meaning just then. A ring at the front door at that time of the morning must surely mean something. He had to curb his inclination to run.

"I have called to see M. le Vicomte du Guesclin by appointment."

Oh, how mysterious it all was! This strange foreign-looking man, so well dressed—better dressed than M. le Vicomte himself—Courtot had not the faintest idea whom he could be. And by appointment? Perhaps that was the letter last night! He carried a little bag. Perhaps it contained rings for M. le Vicomte to choose from! But while all these thoughts whirled in his mind, Courtot's face was quite impassive.

"I will tell M. le Vicomte," he said slowly. "Will you step inside?"

And how would the Vicomte take it? Would he be surprised, or, knowing perhaps, all about it would he be delighted? Surely he must show some sign—express something?

But not at all. He was quite calm. It even seemed as if it were disagreeable news to him.

"Tell him I will come in a moment," he said quietly. "I will just finish with this soap and water. The green-fly have got so thick these last few days. Tell him I will be in in a moment."

Then it was not a ring. Could the green-fly possibly have mattered if it were? Courtot walked back disappointedly to the house.

Five minutes later M. le Vicomte followed him. The foreign-looking gentleman was waiting in the square-roomed hall. The Vicomte bowed to him as he entered. The foreign-looking gentleman washed his hands and bowed as well.

"My name is Lasson, sir, Mr. Lasson. I represent Messrs. Reitz of New Bond Street. You wrote to us last night saying that you had some articles of value that——"

"Historical value, Mr. Lasson."

"Quite so. And you want us to purchase——"

"Pardon—not purchase. I made that clear in my letter—not purchase." He raised his head; he looked straightly in Mr. Lasson's eyes. All this was more hurtful to his pride than living in a Bloomsbury boarding-house, and the more his pride suffered, the higher his head was held.

"I am," he went on, "inconvenienced by a little temporary embarrassment, and in my letter, I said that I required some money advanced upon these two or three things which I am prepared to part with for a short time."

Mr. Lasson's lip curled to a smile.

"We're not money-lenders you know, sir. Ours

is a goldsmith's business. We are diamond merchants, of course, too; but the business is principally concerned with the goldsmiths. I should like to see these things you have, but—er" he smiled again—"I think you must have made some mistake. We are not money-lenders."

When you are not accustomed to doing business with trade, when you are sensitive, moreover, about the particular business you are about to transact, they know just how to bully you, these merchants. The pawnbroker, for instance, knows very well by that furtive manner of yours that it is your first visit to such a very objectionable, but very necessary, place. He bullies you, oh! you know he does. He asks you, in a very loud and inconsequent voice, how much you want on this, and you whisper back so that the woman with a bundle of clothes in the next compartment shall not hear you, "I don't mind —anything."

"Well, you must name a sum," he says as though you were wasting his time.

Oh, certainly he has you at his mercy. He knows it too. You whisper the first sum that comes into your head. It is perhaps half of what you want, but you are anxious to get away.

He smiles sublimely and says he will give you half of that. You try to show surprise; but your spirit is broken. You take it. You would take anything to get away.

This Mr. Lasson—a Jew you may be sure—coming down into the country upon the order of a vicomte of the French nobility, and finding this little five-roomed cottage to be his residence, was armed at once with all those weapons which a tradesman needs to bully a customer into a bargain. The old gentleman must want the money very badly or he would never have sent to Messrs. Reitz; he must want it very badly indeed or he would never part with historical treasures, valuables which, if you are in the

trade, experience will teach you a man parts with last of all.

There was all the atmosphere here for an excellent bargain. Only the disreputable surroundings of the pawnshop were needed to make coercion complete.

M. le Vicomte was being driven already. He wanted to ask, if they were not money-lenders, then why had they sent anyone down to see him, or taken any notice of his letter at all? But he was afraid of breaking off negotiations and he wanted the money so much. Had he not promised it to Rozanne?

He tried, oh! he did try to make a stand against it.

"Is it any good my showing you the things then?" he asked. But he said it so hesitatingly that this Shylock of the trade had nothing to fear.

"Oh, I'd like to look at them, and we'll see what we can do, now I've come down all this way. Yes, I may as well have a look at them. Possibly they won't be of any value to us at all, but we—er—we understood that you were the Vicomte du Guesclin—"

His eye wandered round the walls of the little room.

"That is my title," said the old gentleman.

"Well, I shall be very pleased to see these treasures of yours, M. le Vicomte. As I say, we'll see what we can do."

"Then if you will wait a moment," said the Vicomte, and he hurried out of the room. He dared not trust the fetching of them to Courtot. Courtot would understand, and he would misunderstand, too, Courtot must never hear of this. He had often looked at these treasures in wonder. They stood as relics in his mind of that *ancien régime* which he was so fond of speaking of. No, Courtot must never know what had happened. He took them out of

the drawer where they were kept under lock and key. No one must ever hear of it, and then one day—he unwrapped them tenderly from their bindings—one day they would come back again—one day when that forty thousand pounds was his. They should return then, back to his safe keeping once more, and nobody should ever know of the terrible journey they had made.

One by one he laid them tenderly in the palm of his hand. When at the boarding-house he used to say, "There is no France—there are only a few French people." That was true, ah! very true. There was no France left then, or what there was he held there in the palm of his open hand. That was all that was left of France now—a few gems, a few jewels—things to be found in museums and in art galleries, and just those few French people—that was all. But there was nothing left which now formed an active part in the life of the country itself—nothing—nothing. France was lying sleeping under the glass cases of the galleries of Europe, and here was he, about to part with those few remaining possessions of his which held in the little space they occupied upon the palm of his hand all the grandeur, all the nobility, all the wonder of that great country he loved so well.

He closed his fingers tightly over them; the little ring which Marie Antoinette had worn, with its diamonds set about that frail lock of her hair—diamonds that still sparkled as though her eyes were in the heart of them; that little brooch which she had unfastened from her white throat as she stood on the scaffold listening to the cries of her murderers clamouring to see her blood—how could he part with them? They meant so much—they meant all—yet did they mean all to him? Would he be parting with them if they meant all?

His fingers felt for the little snuff-box. Actually the tears were in his eyes and his lips were quivering

as he took that out of his pocket. How could he part with that? How? There was only one force that drove him. It was for Rozanne.

Then, in all solemnity, a tear or two pressing from his eyes and tumbling down his cheeks, he opened the lid of the snuff-box. He pinched a little of the powder between his fingers and raised it with the characteristic action to his nostrils. There was emotion indeed to hide now; but he was quite alone; there was no need to hide it. It was not for that purpose that he took a last pinch of snuff. This was the last he would take for perhaps some months —some months. He closed the box gently, brushed his moustache with his silk handkerchief and tried to conceal from himself the fact that he had wiped a tear from his cheek at the same time.

Then he descended the stairs into the hall again.

"These are the three little things, Mr. Lasson," he said with a steady voice, and he laid them gently on the table. "I want two hundred and seventy-five pounds for them, with an option of repurchasing them before the expiration of eighteen months."

He did say it so bravely. You could never have told from his voice of that little tragedy of parting which had taken place upstairs.

"Two hundred and seventy-five pounds!" The dealer's eyebrows lifted. He smiled with sublime benevolence. You could see him coming to the conclusion that the old gentleman wanted humouring. "Two hundred and seventy-five pounds for these three little things." He took them up, one by one, fixing a magnifying monocle to his eye and examining them in a coldly technical way. "Why, they are not worth fifty pounds between them." He looked at the snuff-box last of all, examining the diamonds in which the name was set upon the lid. "You know these diamonds are very small," he continued, "very small indeed; they're good, perhaps, but—and who was this Louis anyway? Have

you any idea? Some relation of yours, I suppose; I see it's about one hundred and twenty years old."

"I have not that great honour or good fortune," said M. le Vicomte, simply, "to be related to the throne of France. This Louis—as you speak of him—was Louis XVI."

This answer would have crushed any man but an English Jew. He looked up imperturbably.

"Oh," he said, "have you got an authentic guarantee for this?"

The fingers of M. le Vicomte clutched against his palm.

"No further guarantee than that His Majesty gave it into the hands of my grandfather as he started on his way to the scaffold."

There is no such thing as pride about a fact like this. It lifts above pride. Pride, in fact, only takes from its value. You state it—that is all. There was no other note than the mere expression of the truth in M. le Vicomte's voice as he said it. He did not even watch the overwhelming effect it had upon this tradesman with whom he was stooping to bargain.

But Mr. Lasson could not conceal his surprise. That this old gentleman, living in this cramped cottage—a workman's cottage, no doubt—while he himself paid the rent for a substantial flat out Clapham way which could swallow this place in its capacious dimensions, swallow it rent and all, that he should belong to a family which had been the friends of kings; it was more than he could understand all at once. He became more respectful. He became more amenable. He came, in fact, to terms.

The money was paid. Certain documents, which he had brought with him, showing how much he had been prepared, were signed. They compelled M. le Vicomte to buy back the articles—ah! but not at the price that he had received for them, oh, no! It compelled him to pay them back within eighteen

months, failing which they passed into the possession of Messrs. Reitz.

He delayed one moment with the pen in his hand ere he signed. Suppose M. Courvoisier had been mistaken about what his uncle had said? But he had promised; he could not forget that. He had promised and this was the only way.

His pen lowered to the paper. It moved slowly across the line which Mr. Lasson pointed out with a finger none too clean.

Then, in that spidery writing, so typical, so French, you could have seen his signature:

"Phillippe, Raoul du Guesclin."

That was all.

For many a month to come now he would have no snuff-box wherewith to help him to conceal his emotions. Well, he lifted his head high, it was *bourgeois* to be despondent.

CHAPTER XXXII.

DUBILLON ET CIE., PARIS.

NEVER was the sun so bright, never had the bees so much business to transact with Mrs. Simpkins' pinks in Mr. Somerset's garden as on that morning when, after Mr. Lasson's departure, M. le Vicomte walked up to the Red House and was shown into the long, cool drawing-room—cool because the sun-blinds cast their shadows, and by contrast made the world outside seem so overpowered with heat.

In his pocket were the two hundred and fifty pounds. Perhaps he might be excused if he were a little proud of that. He was a day earlier than he had said he would be. They would think him so expeditious, and Rozanne, she would be so pleased.

The wrench of parting with his treasures was beginning to be lessened in its pain by the approaching pleasure of giving the money quite quietly and without comment a day before his promise.

Their thinking him very rich had never made him seem so to himself. The essence of the sensation of poverty it is to be thought of ample means when those few coppers are jingling in the pocket. But now, with this two hundred and fifty pounds in his possession, he felt ready to believe anyone who would tell him he was a wealthy man.

It was a delightful experience while it lasted. In another five minutes it would be all over; but while it lasted he enjoyed it to the full.

He had asked for Miss Rozanne.

"I'll go," said the maid, "and find her if she's in the house. But I believe she's gone out into the garden. Will you come into the drawing-room, sir?"

This was the room from which Mr. Somerset had dragged him only the day before, dragged him from it because it belonged to Rozanne. The very reason why he would have wished to stay in it. All these little ornaments, those few books on a hanging shelf, the flowers, the roses that permeated the whole room with a perfume which made him feel that the spirit of her clung to the place when she had departed from it—all of these were hers.

And there was her little upright piano, proud of its cunning draperies of Chinese embroidered silks, turning its back in a corner of the room and showing its finery to everyone who entered. He smiled as he looked at it. It was very like a woman, that little upright piano.

"It's like Rozanne herself; it's like them all," he thought. No doubt it had a timid, tinkly little note. And sometimes, perhaps, she played on it. The fingers he had kissed so many times under the apple tree ran thoughtlessly over its keys, and the little tinkly notes were delighted to be made to sing

again after possibly quite a long period of silence.

Thinking all these foolish, sentimental things, he walked across to the corner where it stood. There he seated himself on the piano stool, opening the little instrument, exposing the well-worn keys.

Dubillon et Cie., Paris!

This was the piano he had given Rozanne de Pontreuse, the piano which she had played upon and sang to him with in the rooms in the Avenue Kléber! The little rosewood piano which she had taken a fancy to, and which he had sent her almost before she could return home! This child probably never knew who had given it to her mother or she would surely have told him.

Dubillon et Cie., Paris.

Oh, the memories that came back with that name as he stared at it! He struck one note gently with a trembling finger, fearful of the sounds it would awaken in his heart. It was, as he had thought, a very tinkly little note now, but there came an echo with it, vibrating through hollow chambers and empty recesses of his mind, painful—oh, full of pain—as when the blood flows back again through unaccustomed veins.

The tears started to his eyes. He leant forward on the stained ivory keys, covering that memorable name of the maker, bending his head forward till it touched his hands.

"Rozanne," he whispered, "Rozanne, shall I ever hear you sing again? Will she—will she sing like you too? Not quite—not quite—— "

At the sound of approaching voices, he lifted his head. It was Rozanne. She was talking to someone in the garden. They passed slowly by the French window. The maid had not found her yet. Who was she talking to? He could see nothing from where he sat.

Just near the window they stopped.

"God, if I'd known!"

That was Mr. Dalziel. He had never heard his voice, but he knew. There is no surer guide than instinct in these matters. If he had known what? There was the note of utter despair in the words.

It never entered M. le Vicomte's mind that he was eavesdropping. That sentence had arrested him. He held his breath.

"Can't you tell me," the voice continued, "if I'd been sooner—only yesterday morning, for instance—can't you tell me what you would have said then?"

"Oh, it's not fair, it's not right," he heard Rozanne reply. "You ought not to say any more to me. I've given my word. I'm engaged."

"Yes, I know that. I know that. I wouldn't ask you to break your word. But I'll wait. I can wait years. What's twenty years? Heavens! I can wait that. And perhaps then. I can wait if you'll only say what, upon my soul, I do believe is in the bottom of your heart."

Oh, the youth of that! Twenty years was nothing to him! He could wait twenty years. And what was twenty years? M. le Vicomte looked on twenty years before him.

Out across the desert—this desert of a world, he looked, and it was twilight now; the sun was dipping down behind the hills of sand, the grey coldness crept into his blood. And he strained his eyes to see, but the mirage was gone. Nothing more was to be seen of that phantom oasis. It had vanished.

He was an old man.

There were no twenty years left for him to wait. Were there ten? He doubted it. And yet that was what he was offering this child. Thirty years ago he could have said perhaps just what this young man was saying then; but not now, not now. And was it fair? Was it right? Was it a just exchange?

He listened for her answer to Dalziel's question. She gave it in a whisper. He could not hear it. But with Dalziel's reply he understood it all.

"My God! I'll wait then. I'll wait. I won't stay here any longer now. I couldn't. I daren't. I'll get a telegram sent me and get away this evening. But you'll know I'm waiting, won't you? I *shall* wait. But there's one thing I can't understand. You say your uncle told you, and yet you cared for me. Then why did you——?"

"Uncle Wilfrid didn't tell me who it was."

"And you thought it was me!"

No answer.

But was any answer needed? M. le Vicomte closed the piano gently. They moved on down the pathway out of hearing. Was any answer needed? He rose slowly to his feet.

The night was fast about him, now. The mirage had vanished. Oh, he felt a very old man—a *very* old man now. That which he had listened to a moment ago, that was youth. There was no youth left in him. He had imagined it. That was what must have happened. He had imagined he was young again; and really, what he used to say to the people in the boarding-house in Torrington Square was quite true.

"My dear madame," he used to say, "I am not interesting, I am merely old."

He was merely old, that was all.

Slowly he crossed the room and stood by the mantelpiece. How could he face her now? How was it possible? It seemed a thing then to him to be ashamed of—this age of his—Sixty-two! How could he face her now?

The door opened. His heart beat in his throat.

It was the maid.

"I have looked in the garden, sir, and all through the house, but I can't find Miss Rozanne nowhere."

He breathed with conscious relief. He would not tell her where to find them.

Then he drew a bulky envelope from the pocket of his coat.

"Will you please then give her this," he said quietly, "and say it is from M. le Vicomte du Guesclin. I am much obliged."

She watched him as he walked down the path to the front gate. Then she closed the door and went down to the kitchen.

"He carries himself wonderful straight for an old man," she said to the cook. "He holds his head like that," she perked her chin up in the air.

But the cook took no notice. She was cutting new pastry into shapes, and that, as you know, cannot be done with a wandering eye.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE RENUNCIATION.

ABOUT an hour later M. le Vicomte was seated at lunch. Courtot had said lunch was served. They called it lunch. I wish you might have seen it. Three thin little rounds of toast nodding together in a toast rack. Beneath a cover to keep it hot, on a plate before him, a herring, fried, and a glass of cold, spring water.

Frugal? Oh, yes, but not so sumptuous as you might expect for a vicomte. There was not even any melted butter. Perhaps that was a mistake, because Courtot apologised for it.

"I am sorry, M. le Vicomte, there is no butter in the house," he said.

The old gentleman had not noticed the want of it. He looked up quite satisfied.

"It does not matter," he replied. "It is quite nice as it is. You know you are improving in your cooking, Courtot. Is that due to Mrs. Bulpitt?"

You would never have thought, listening to the note of unselfish interest in the Vicomte's voice, how wounded and broken was the brave spirit within

him then. All the world it seemed was to know of happiness but he. In place of it he must just realise how old and how poor a man he was, how much he had fallen from his high estate, and endeavour through all this beating stress of circumstance to keep his head unbowed.

"She is good, monsieur. She tells me many little hints. If you notice, monsieur, I do not burn the things now."

"Yes, I have noticed that, Courtot, I've noticed it."

"I always ask her—I take the things in to her before I bring them home. I show them to her and I say, 'How long for this?' I say. 'M. le Vicomte,' I say, 'he likes it well done.' And she weighs it on a little scale, and she say, 'So long or so long.' *Voila!* So it is I do not burn as I used to do."

"And is the day fixed for the marriage, Courtot?"

"Yes, M. le Vicomte. It will be the week after the week after the next, on a Thursday." Courtot smiled.

"And I suppose you will want a little holiday?" he continued thoughtfully.

"Oh, no, monsieur. I have said to her, 'Shall I ask M. le Vicomte for a day or two of holiday?' I say it just to try, monsieur, because I know myself that it could not be. I could not leave you alone. And she say, 'A holiday!' she say. 'Is it not a holiday getting married?' she say. 'And what would M. le Vicomte do for himself?' Ah, monsieur, she is good. She is so good—I sometimes now think she is beautiful."

The old gentleman laid a herring bone carefully on the side of his plate.

"I wonder if you know how true that is?" he said musingly. "It is very true, you know. Every good woman is beautiful. You may pass her by a thousand times in the street; but when once you know how good she is, your eyes are bound to follow her. There is something about the beauty of

goodness which makes every man's eyes look up."

He stopped abruptly. The little gate had swung open. It made such a plaintive noise, that little wicket gate, and always seemed so glad to swing to again. He lifted a little in his chair. It was Rozanne! She smiled. She had seen he was at lunch. He looked down at the meal before him; the half-consumed herring, the glass of water, the one thin little piece of toast that was left in the rack. Then her knock fell. Courtot began to move towards the door.

"Courtot!" M. le Vicomte called him back. "Take these things away before you open the door. Quickly, quickly! Take them away. I—I have finished. Just bring in the cup of coffee!"

Can you picture how the British domestic would have stood amazed, mouth gaping, at such an order? But Courtot understood. A herring, one herring for lunch! Of course it was impossible. The plates vanished in the twinkling of an eye. The table was cleared, the cup of coffee brought in. M. le Vicomte had just finished his lunch, all in the twinkling of an eye. Rozanne might judge for herself, having once dined with him, what a charming little lunch it must have been.

In another moment, Courtot had opened the door. She came hurriedly into the room. In that quick moment, M. le Vicomte could see how her eyes were red with crying, but behind the shadow of the tears, there was a smile of thankfulness.

"Oh, what can I say!" she exclaimed. The envelope which he had left for her she held in her hand. "How can I possibly thank you? You don't know what a relief it means, and you have been so quick. I thought you had said to-morrow, and now this morning I find you have left it for me."

Impulsively she shook his hand.

He bent over it.

"I have only done what I could do," he said gently, "that is all."

"But it has meant so much. Uncle Wilfrid is coming to thank you after lunch. I couldn't wait. You understand, of course, that he will pay it back as soon as possible. But he is going to talk to you about that."

M. le Vicomte shook his head.

"Have you forgotten what I said yesterday?" he asked. "I never borrow and I never lend. I have given that to you. Don't let me hear you talk any more about repayment. I have that to ask of you which, if you grant it, will prove more noble of you than any return of my money, which only affords me pleasure to give. Shall we come out into the garden? I don't feel I can talk here, and oh! I've got such a lot to say—things, too, that I'm not very proud of, but they must be said." He took her arm. "We've talked under that apple tree before now," he added with a smile. "Do you mind?"

Mind? Why should she mind? Gratitude was very full in the heart of her just then, hiding, if only for the moment, the bitterness that lay beneath.

"Now," he said, when she was seated on the chair which he placed for her in the shadow. "Now, I have something to say of which, you must believe me, I am so utterly ashamed."

She looked up at him, wondering, but saying nothing. He—ashamed? It seemed so impossible—it seemed ludicrous even. She, perhaps—there might be some shame in her heart that she had permitted Dalziel to say even as much as he had said. She might be ashamed that she had admitted to him her mistake. There was nothing so very honourable to M. le Vicomte in that. She might be ashamed, but what was there in his life, so generous, so noble as he was, of which he could be ashamed? There was wonder in her eyes, but she did not give it speech.

She waited. He was fumbling with his fingers in his waistcoat pocket. She recognised, she remembered the action. He was going to take his little pinch of snuff before he began. She waited. But still his fingers groped. He could not find it. He had left it in a pocket of some other suit. Ah, yes, he recollected where he had left it. There was just the least sign of a sigh, annoyance perhaps. Would he go and fetch it? No, he continued without it.

"Did your mother ever tell you the saying that finds its way so often into the annals of the Du Guesclins? I don't suppose she would have done so. You would have been too young. There is a saying, nevertheless. It has been found often engraved upon various things—snuff-boxes, patch-boxes, once a watch had it that had been in the family possession. It says, 'A woman is a gift—be grateful.' No one knows who first said it. No one knows where it comes from. It has never been found in any literature; yet there it has clung to our family—like a motto almost—'*La femme viens du ciel—soyez content*'—'A woman is a gift—be grateful.' And I am to be the first, it seems, to disobey. There is scarcely one record I believe in the family history where a Du Guesclin has been unchivalrous to a woman. It is bred in the blood of us, to be grateful for such a gift and to treat it well. Bred in the blood—but there is little of that breeding left in France now, and I suppose I am to prove how true that is. You wonder what I am going to say?"

"Yes."

"It is the little breeding left in me which, I suppose, makes me hedge it round, wrap it up in this soft tissue of words. I asked you to be my wife, Rozanne."

She bent her head.

"I pledged my word to take your life and make it just so happy as I could."

She looked up quickly, the instinct of what he was

about to say had trembled to her mind and she could not check that sudden lifting of the head. He saw it. He knew what it meant, but it seemed that he saw nothing at all.

"I want your leave to take back that word," he said quietly. "I know it is most despicable. The shame I feel, alone, would tell me that. But I want you, Rozanne, little cousin, I want you to set me free of my word."

It is possible that one hope might have been left him even then. It is possible that he thought she might say, "No! I cannot let you free!" For one moment the expectancy of it was there, eager, in his eyes; the next, it flickered out. For a space she said nothing and the moment passed.

"Oh, but why?" she asked. "Why should you ask that?"

Because, do you know, in a short time from now it will be my sixty-third birthday. Sixty-three! Can you imagine it? How old—how far away it seems to you, just twenty-one. And while I have been here, in Sunningham, you have been making me forget that I was old. But I am old. We're not going to quarrel about that any more. It is you who are young when you say I am not old. It is your youth you have been seeing, not mine. I am not young, and what I have been offering and desiring to do was quite, quite wrong. If you were to live with me, you would be old, too. I should sap your youth from you. You would give it, that I might seem young, and then, there would come a day when I should crumble suddenly into dust, and you would look round to find your youth again, but it would be gone—gone. I should have taken it with me. I have been thinking all this since—since yesterday, and I believe I am right. I shall go back to Paris again. I shall be happier there. And you will let me free—"

She tried to meet his eyes. She strove to tell him

that it was all untrue. But the words were not natural; they would not come. She could not force them from her; and, torn because she could not say them, she buried her face in her arm and her shoulders shook to the sobs that broke from her.

He took her hand, pressing it in his own.

"Your tears only make me more ashamed," he said. "I never thought that I should treat a woman as I have treated you now. One day perhaps you will find it in the heart of you to forgive me—one day when you realise that I was right. Keep your youth, little cousin, don't let any man steal it from you. Let him give you youth for youth. That is the only fair exchange for the most wonderful possession that you have."

He lifted her face and looked into her weeping eyes.

"Tell me I am free," he said again, "free to go back to Paris; and just remember, perhaps, that I loved your mother, and that in my old-fashioned way I love you, too. The fruit upon the apple tree does come too late, my little cousin. And the Fate that brings it so, well, we may question it, but that is all. Tell me, let me hear you say that I am free."

Her lips moved. There was no sound. What could she say? How could she say it? He bent down his head to catch her words.

"You've done so much for me," she whispered. "I would do anything for you."

"Then you will set me free?"

"Or marry you," she replied firmly, meaning it, unwilling even now to take the greater happiness of what he offered.

For one moment he wavered. For one moment the subtle voice of Chance whispered cunningly in his ear, but the breeding in the blood was there, that very breeding which he had told her he was about to blemish with a stain.

"Then let me go," he said, "let me go. I came too late."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE WILL.

THE days toil, or they run, they move in chains or they are as free as air. It is all a matter of the mind. We have clocks upon our mantel-pieces which measure out Time; but there is a pendulum swinging in the mind which marks out Eternity.

It was a wonderful morning and seven days had gone by. All the roses in the garden were warm, right to the heart of them, even their perfume was heavy with the heat of the sun. It was a day that peaches begin to ripen on a southern wall.

M. le Vicomte was at work in his garden. There are always weeds to destroy. To those who love it, a garden never sleeps.

Since that morning when he had made his appeal to Rozanne he had tried to find so much work to do in that little garden of his. Now he was pruning his roses. It was far too late in the year, but what did that matter? He was not aware of it. The beneficial results of his energies lay in his imagination. The fruits of his labour would be sure to ripen in his fancy. In a world where the seeming of things is of so vast account, even this is more than most of us hope for.

But never had be been so industrious before. It is the only refuge, the only sanctuary. The mind centres, settling into an eddy of despair when once it is left to drift upon a current of regret. M. le Vicomte would show no despair. His life was over. He was an old man. It was just that he did not count any longer—that was all. But he made the admission only in the silence of his own conscience. Even the Fate that commanded the ordering of such

destinies as this should learn nothing of the bitterness he suffered.

He would go to Paris. As soon as he was rich again he would go to Paris. If his caravan of souls were to be found again in this empty desert of existence it was surely there of all places. There were his friends, whom, in his poverty, he had been too proud to meet. There were memories, enough to last so short a lifetime as was left to him. Yes, he would go, as he had said to Rozanne, he would go to Paris.

And he clipped and cut away at his rose trees as he whispered all these resolutions to himself.

Then Courtot came out into the garden bearing a letter. The old gentleman stood up to rest his back.

"What is it, Courtot?"

"A letter, M. le Vicomte."

It was from Paris. He waited until Courtot had returned to the house; but he could wait no longer. This was the first time in his life that he had given way to eagerness. His fingers trembled as he tore open the envelope. It was from M. Courvoisier. Had he not known the writing, instinct alone would have told him that.

His eyes ran hurriedly over the lines; then the letter fluttered slowly to the ground. His eyes followed it, but he made no effort to stoop and pick it up.

"Your uncle, the Marquis de Pontreuse, died the day before yesterday," this was what he had read. "His will was made public to-day, and how am I to tell you, because I feel that I did you an irreparable wrong in letting you know those few weeks ago what he had said to me, for you are not mentioned in it. My eagerness to give you the news while I was in England outweighed my better judgment. I can only hope you will overlook it. Your doubts of the truth of what I had been told were only too well founded. I am more sorry, more grieved than I can possibly express."

There the letter had fallen to the ground.

Things were no different. Nothing really had changed at all. It was only a dream—a mirage—all of it. This little cottage, the garden, the apple tree, Rozanne, the hopes he had cherished, the visions he had seen, they were all moments only in a wonderful dream.

Now he was awake. Now life was going on once more as it had been, as he had almost grown accustomed to it before ever he came down to this little village of Sunningham. He had thought he had been overwhelmed with gifts—the gift of youth, the gift of love, the gift of fortune. But really he had been given nothing. It was only his imagination. Fate had not robbed him of anything. Fate had taken nothing away. There had been nothing to take. Something had been mislaid—that was all. In the dream, he had mislaid those three little treasures of his. He could never recover those now. But they were the only things which had been taken from him. Otherwise, he was just as rich, just as poor, just the same as he had been.

He stooped and picked up the letter. His mind was numbed. He realised but could not appreciate. He knew that it was impossible to live on any longer in the cottage. He owed wages to Courtot as it was. He could not live there without a servant; Courtot must be paid to the last penny and dismissed again. Finally dismissed this time. He would never permit himself to dream any more. The cottage must be left; he must let it, and then—well it did not quite matter what then. For the present it was sufficient to realise that he must leave Sunningham.

There were twenty-five pounds left over from the sale of his little treasures. That would be very useful now. For a moment he stopped in his thoughts, wondering why he did not rail against the Fate that had brought him to this. But what was the benefit to be gained? He knew that Fate so well. It had driven

him from Paris in just the same way as it was driving him now from Sunningham. Raillery would only appease its insatiable demands the more.

Carrying the letter in his hand, he walked back slowly to the house and mounted the stairs to his bedroom. From the drawer where he had kept his treasures, he took out the remainder of the money they had brought. Then he descended into the hall and rang the bell.

It seemed almost as if he were eager to fulfil the duty that lay before him and be done with it.

Courtot made his appearance.

"I think I owe you for your wages, Courtot," he said quietly.

Courtot shrugged his shoulders. What did that matter? It was not that he despised money, but contentment is more valuable. He was content.

"It is only a little, M. le Vicomte. We have not been here so very long. I can wait."

"But why should you wait, Courtot? They are overdue. Besides, you will want some when you get married."

"Oh, monsieur, no! Mrs. Bulpitt, she say, 'When an old woman like me gets married for the second time,' she say, 'it is extravagant to spend money.' She will make a cake, monsieur, with almonds and white sugar on the top, but that is all. And she ask me if you would accept a piece, monsieur, because she say it will be very good. 'You do not guess how good it will be,' she say."

The old gentleman looked up at Courtot. There was even a smile in his eyes. It could not be said of these two that they were dreaming. There was something very real, something very substantial about that cake with the almonds and white sugar on the top.

"Oh, I shall be very pleased," he said. Then his expression altered. Now was his humiliation. "But I have something which I very much regret to say, Courtot," he continued. "I am going to leave the

cottage here. I shall let it perhaps. But I shall not live here any more, and where I am going now, I shall not require your services."

"M. le Vicomte!"

"Yes, I am very sorry, but it is so."

"But where do you go, monsieur?"

"Probably back to London."

"Then I come also, M. le Vicomte. I can be somewhere near, where I may be of some service as I was before. I come also, monsieur."

The Vicomte smiled and shook his head.

"You have other responsibilities now, my good Courtot," he said. "There is Mrs. Bulpitt. What you were earning in London might have been enough to keep your body and soul together—it is not a generous offer to any woman. You will find better work here if you stay in Sunningham. I am going to recommend you to Mr. Somerset. Then you will be quite comfortable."

Courtot threw out his hands in gesticulation.

"Then I will not be married, monsieur. I come to London by myself. Do you think, M. le Vicomte, that I who serve you all these years will be content to go myself now into another family? Oh, *mon Dieu! C'est impossible—absolument!* I will not be married, monsieur. I do not know what has happened that you should say all this—it seems to me terrible, but if you go to London, Monsieur le Vicomte, then I come too. *Voila!*"

The old gentleman laid his hand on Courtot's shoulder.

"This will not do," he said gently. "This will not do at all. It was all very well when you had no one but yourself to consider, but now, my good fellow, it is different. There is a good woman in the case, and a woman is a gift—a good woman is a fortune—be grateful. Besides, until I pay you this money and finally discharge you, you are my servant. You owe me obedience, and I tell you I will not have it so. I will not have it so. *Voila! c'est tout!*"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE BULL-DOG SPIRIT.

WHEN you have something unpleasant to tell a woman, go to her at once and get the matter over as quickly as possible. It is bound to be a nasty business, and the pain you will suffer in anticipation will never be compensated for by the measures of diplomacy which you are able to prepare in your delay.

Diplomacy, of course, is of very little value where a woman is concerned. She draws her own inferences, she gets her own impressions, and no deep-laid scheme of yours will ever alter them; not one of your most cunning observations will ever penetrate to the root of their existence.

The only consolation, when you consider these intricacies of the feminine mind, is the fact that a woman is as much a mystery to herself as she is to you.

Courtot, fearful no doubt of what Mrs. Bulpitt would say, was yet too dismayed by that which M. le Vicomte had told him to stop and think of diplomatic measures. There was no hesitation in his mind as to what he intended to do. Wherever his master went, there would he follow. A relationship such as theirs is not to be broken in a moment. If the advantages of life had been his foremost consideration, he would never have left Paris. The letters of recommendation which M. le Vicomte had given him then had been far more valuable than any situation he might be offered at the Red House. He had not hesitated to put them aside and follow his master to London, and now, romance or no romance, chivalrous or not, he was quite prepared to obey his first instincts again.

Accordingly, without waiting to adjust his mind to

the difficulties of the situation, he set off for the little cottage, three doors from the sweet shop, to place himself at the mercy of Mrs. Bulpitt. She might say what she liked, and there was little doubt in his mind that she would like to say a good deal, but his mind was made up. By an incomprehensible method of reasoning, M. le Vicomte stood in his mind for all the noblest ideals of his country, and though patriotism be a false sentiment at the heart of it, it is at least self-sacrificing. Mrs. Bulpitt was not the only woman who has been made to suffer at its expense.

She opened the door quickly, as quickly as possible, in answer to his hurried knock. Soap-suds were dripping in big watery bubbles from her bare elbows. She was in the midst of doing her washing at the back of the house.

"What's the matter?" she asked when he had entered the parlour and she had closed the door behind him.

He sank down into a chair and looked up at her. Oh, it was not an easy job. Now that he came face to face with it he realised how difficult it was. She would be so cross. But what was the good of it? She could not marry a poor man, not a man as poor as he was going to be when he got back to London. Ten shillings a week! He had told M. le Vicomte that it was enough, but he would forget none too quickly the discomforts of a waiter's life in that great gloomy city.

When she asked again what it was, he settled himself down to tell her the whole truth, hiding nothing. That much at least he felt was demanded of him.

"It is very sad," he said. "I wish I could make you understand how sad it is."

She sat down by the side of him, took his hand. The soapy water dripped down from the tips of her fingers on to his coat; but what did that matter? A human hand in such moments of life as this, however wrinkled, however dripping with soap-suds, however

ill-shaped it may be, is worth all the conventional expressions of sympathy in the language.

"Tell me," she said simply, "tell me."

He rubbed his eyes. Could it be possible that it was some cruel mistake? He had learnt it all so suddenly, with no warning, no preparation. As yet he understood no more of its meaning than that his master was poorer still; but why? That was beyond him. And did it mean that he would never marry Mademoiselle Rozanne? He certainly would never take her to live with him in Torrington Square. Courtot knew only too well his chivalrous opinion of women. No, there was no mistake. He could still hear the words in his ears, "I will not have it so. *Voila! C'est tout!*"

"It is M. le Vicomte," he began.

"Dead?" she asked quickly.

"Ah, no! *Mon Dieu!* It is what I have to tell you about him. I have told you always he was rich. It is a lie. *Voila!* It is not the truth. He is poor. Oh, so poor!" He lifted his hands and shook them in the air. "Ever since he left Paris two years and a half ago he has been so poor. It is always the way, the ones who deserve to be rich, *ciel!* they are as poor as the mouse in the church. I follow him from Paris to London because—because I know how poor he was. I was a waiter—a waiter in the Tottenham Court Road—I walk all day that the other people may sit down, and I starve in order that other people may eat and fill themselves. That is what a waiter have to do in London. But I do it because I know he is poor and I have been his servant. I was born his servant—you understand. That is what I was born. We are nothing else but that. *Le bon Dieu*, He knows why. I do not. But then why should I leave him when he is poor? *Sacré! Pas du tout!*"

His eyes flashed. His hands spread out in vivid gesticulation. He knew he was right. It was the

thing to do. All the logic in the world would not have convinced him otherwise.

"You understand now why I come to London. He come because he is so poor. He live by himself in—in a boarding-house they call it. Oh, *la, la!* And he is Monsieur le Vicomte! But he does not say; he will not have them know. They call him M. du Guesclin. He is so proud. Then M. de Lempriere, he leave him the cottage here, and M. le Vicomte come to live in it. Now, to-day, something happens. I bring him a letter—it is from Paris. He reads it in the garden; I see him drop it. Then slowly he comes into the house and he calls me presently. I come to him and he say 'Courtot,' and he talks in, oh! such a quiet voice, and I always know when something happen, because M. le Vicomte, then he talks very quiet. 'Courtot,' he says, 'I am going to leave the cottage; I am going back to live in London and I shall require your services no longer.' It was just the way he said it to me in Paris, and I know that it is very sad but he does not show that he is sad. It is *bourgeois* to be despondent is what he always say, and he would not for the world show how sad it is. And so now I ask you," he raised that damp, wrinkled hand to his lips and kissed it, "what am I to do? He offers to recommend me to Mr. Somerset at the Red House, but I ask you, what am I to do? Am I to leave him—to let him go back alone and be buried in that terrible, black city, or am I to go as I did before from Paris, and leave better situations than it will even be at the Red House? I ask you what I am to do?"

Mrs. Bulpitt rose and walked to the little window, where, for some moments, she stood looking out over the heads of the three geranium plants. She had not been slow to realise what this question implied. She knew only too well why it had been put to her. Thoughts of what all the chapel people would say, if they heard she was not going to be married, crowded into her mind. She guessed just what Mrs. Cargill

that bosom friend of hers—she guessed just what she would have to say about it. She could see quite plainly the superior smile under the walrus moustache of Mr. Mathews when she told him that the banns need not be published the next Sunday. But did they really make any difference? Did they make as much difference to her as the love of "that good fellow, Courtot"—so she remembered the old gentleman calling him—would make to M. le Vicomte? How could they? Yet she dreaded the thought of them. But the remembrance of his kindness to her, the way he had so nearly made her cry when he had told her what a good woman he knew she must be, this overrode all the dreadful thoughts of the chapel people. She turned round.

"You mean as how you can't marry me if you go, isn't that it?" she asked.

Oh, but why had she come to that point so quickly? He had wanted to avoid it at first, to lead up to it slowly, breaking the ice with a gentle and considerate hand. Now she had robbed him of all his defence—now she was going to be so cross. He looked at her appealingly.

"How could I marry you, *ma chérie*, if I was so poor as well? Where I was a waiter, in the Tottenham Court Road, I get ten shillings a week, and sometimes a little extra when I was fortunate. But that is not enough! Oh, no! If I have a wife, she must be happy! You would not be happy if I give you only ten shillings a week. It would not do. You cannot love when you are hungry. I know, I have tried. It is impossible. So I come and ask you what I am to do?"

She stood before him, hands on hips—a washerwoman to the world at large, a washerwoman, but with a great heart beating beneath that ample bosom of hers.

"Well, shall I tell you what you've got to do?" she began.

He nodded. What was she going to say? He trembled to hear it.

"You go with the Vicomte to London; you don't leave him for me nor anyone. Every man in this world has his master somewhere—he's yours. That's what you do. You go with him."

Courtot lifted slowly to his feet. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked into the little round grey eyes.

"And I leave behind me as good a woman as I shall ever find. I never did think, when first I opened the door of the cottage to you that evening, when you asked might you see M. le Vicomte, I did never think I should find it so hard to say good-bye."

"But there ain't going to be no good-bye," she said quickly. "No! I've got my pension; it's only five shillings a week, but I've got it. And it'll be a qeeer thing if I can't do my share of the work as well. I won't stay here to be laughed at by the chapel people. That ain't Mrs. Bulpitt!"

She said that with all the true British spirit—the bull-dog spirit ready to attack on the slightest provocation. But there were tears behind it. After a great effort there is always a reaction. Tears are very consoling then. She laid her head on his shoulder and sobbed, but that was because she was happy—happy in her foolish, sentimental way. The mirage had not vanished for her. She still had her vision of it just as clearly as before.

Courtot lifted her head and looked into her face. It was wrinkled and contorted with crying. Can you imagine anything more ugly than a washerwoman, aged forty-nine, in a paroxysm of weeping?

But he told her he thought she was beautiful, and this from no motive of gallantry. He really thought she was.

There are some holding the theory that Cupid is blind; whilst another school of philosophers support the belief that the defect in his sight is scarcely worth

while taking into account, that in fact it is entirely remedied by the use of rose-coloured glasses.

What is philosophy anyway?

But the latter theory would seem to be more worthy of consideration.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE BOARDING-HOUSE—BLOOMSBURY.

M. LE VICOMTE DU GUESCLIN had formally said good-bye. The formality of it had been of his own choosing. These matters are more easy of accomplishment when others are looking on. Pride urges you to a show of seemingly cheerful resignation which hurries the odious business through and so contrives it, that you have said good-bye and taken your leave before you are actually aware of it.

He had gone up to the Red House on the morning of his departure from Sunningham and, asking for Mr. Somerset, had managed to keep that insistent old gentleman present during the whole of the interview. Had he known that during all that time Rozanne had been wishing for her uncle's absence rather than for his company, it is possible that he might not have addressed so many of his remarks to him. But he did it for her sake as much as for his own.

"It would only make her feel uncomfortable if we were left alone," he thought unselfishly, and so, whenever the old gentleman showed impatient signs of departure, he called him back with a remark that caught his wandering interest.

No mention was made of Dalziel. He was not even aware if the young man were still staying in the house.

When he shook hands with Rozanne at the gate, he just smiled and said:

"You must be very happy one of these days, little

cousin, you were meant to be happy. You have the eyes—all happiness is in the eyes."

Then he set off down the road to the cottage to make his final preparations for departure. She watched him, tears rising, ready and burning, to her eyes until he turned out of sight.

And he thought that that was the last he would see of her, the final setting of the sun behind the hills of sand, that sun by whose conjuring light he had beheld the phantom mirage of his youth.

It had come even to the moment when the old station fly had drawn up to the door. They were hoisting his luggage on to the seat beside the driver and he was looking back at the door of the little square-roomed hall where first he had seen Rozanne, when the sound of running footsteps and the swish of skirts made him turn to find her hurrying down the road.

"I was afraid you might have gone already," she said breathlessly, "and then I hoped you would be going by the evening train, and that I might get the opportunity of saying good-bye to you alone, I couldn't say all I wanted to say while Uncle Wilfrid was there. Couldn't we go into the garden just once more? I suppose other people will come to live here and I shall never see the apple tree again."

He followed her. All this showed him how young she was. In youth one plays with sensations, regardless of the pain they may bring, but as the years go by, one knows that they are much better left alone. He had tried so hard to avoid them, had endeavoured to make his farewell so formal and empty of all disturbing sentiment, and now, here was Rozanne bringing him to the very spot where all their memories congregated, just to say good-bye in the approved-of fashion by all romantics. But oh! who could blame her? He certainly did not. It was only her youth, the youth that he had refused to steal from her. She did not realise that it would have been kinder to let him go alone.

"Would you tell me," she said, "if you were very unhappy? Would you tell me, because I believe you are."

He set his lips to a smile. It would be pitiable to fail now.

"What have I to make me unhappy?" he asked, "so long as I know that by the breaking of my word to you I have not done you any wrong that is irreparable."

She wanted then to tell him how great a service he had done her, that now, in secret, she and Dalziel were engaged to be married, but some inner consciousness held back the words. There seemed a want of necessity for them which kept her silent.

"And when you get back to Paris you will be quite happy again, just like you were when you came down first of all to live in Sunningham?"

When he went back to Paris! It were as well to let her continue to think that.

"Yes, I shall be perfectly happy then."

"And when you see the children on the Champs Elysées will you think of me and the little picture over my bed?"

He took her hand, bent over it and kissed it.

"I shall think of you always," he replied. "Don't be afraid that I shall want the children or the *bonnes* on the Champs Elysées to remember you by." He smiled and tapped his open hand upon his breast. "You will always be in my heart," he said. "It will need only the beating of that to remember you."

He meant as long as he lived. She realised then, as Courtot had done, how wonderfully he said things.

But he dared not trust himself any longer. Pulling out his watch, he declared that it was time to be off. She stood in the roadway, waving her little handkerchief to him as the fly rumbled slowly down the road, misted, half lost in the white cloud of dust that rose behind it.

They were going *to* the station now; they were

going to catch a train. The coachman whipped up the old white horse and they turned the road out of sight.

. . . . . .

The sun had dropped behind the huddled masses of houses in Torrington Square, and a blue smoky evening tinged to purple and mauve in the distance—where distance was to be seen—was creeping up the narrow passages between the buildings and finding its way in deep shadows into the doorways. A lamplighter had just begun his rounds. When there was no great noise of traffic you could hear his footsteps as he hurried round the square. One by one he lit those little yellow beacons—in that blue light of evening like candle flames in the deepening light of a vast church. Then he departed into the unknown where the houses hid him from view.

For a time after he had gone, the square was quite empty. A few sparrows chirped, a cat prowled forth into the dingy garden in the Square's centre in the hope of prey.

Then a four-wheeled cab turned round from one of the corners and drew up before a house, indistinguishable from all the rest except by the number in tarnished brass figures upon the panel of the door.

The driver sat there waiting till his fare should get out. The face of a human being peered through the lace curtains of the front room of the house, then vanished.

After a moment the door of the cab opened, and an old gentleman, his silk hat placed in an exact angle on his head, a white muffler round his neck, and a malacca cane with its blue silk tassel in his hand, stepped out on to the pavement.

Then he mounted the steps to the door, rang the bell and waited. After a long pause it was opened by a foreign-looking waiter, his shirt-front creased and dirty, a little black bone stud barely holding itself in the well-worn stud-hole which kept the body and soul of the shirt together.

"Have you any vacant rooms?" asked the old gentleman.

The foreign waiter shook his head. There was as yet only one sentence he knew in English—he said it then quickly as he held open the door:

"Will you come inside, plees."

The old gentleman stepped inside, the door closed behind him, and some three minutes later they removed his luggage from the somnolent four-wheeler —that was taken into the house as well—the door closed once more, and everything was silent except the jerky twittering of the sparrows and the rumbling of the four-wheeled cab as it drove away in the direction of the lamplighter—into the unknown.

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